

Spring 2017

Devil in a White Dress: Marie-Antoinette and the Fashioning of a Scandal

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DEVIL IN A WHITE DRESS:
MARIE-ANTOINETTE AND THE FASHIONING OF A SCANDAL

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Art & Art History

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Sarah Goodman

May 2017

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

DEVIL IN A WHITE DRESS:
MARIE-ANTOINETTE AND THE FASHIONING OF A SCANDAL

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May 2017

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ABSTRACT

DEVIL IN A WHITE DRESS: MARIE-ANTOINETTE AND THE FASHIONING OF A SCANDAL

by Sarah Goodman

The portrait of Marie-Antoinette by Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, known as *La Reine en gaulle*, has been discussed widely in art history owing to the scandal it provoked when it was exhibited in the Paris Salon in August 1783. Analysis has focused primarily on socio-economic issues of late-*ancien regime* France as a means of understanding how a relatively benign portrait of the Queen of France could engender so much anger when displayed for public consumption, centering around the queen's identity as a public figure in contrast to the private individual painted by Vigée-Lebrun. However, very little has been discussed about the clothing represented in the painting and how the *chemise à la reine*, as the style became known, represented a challenge to the established system of conveying queenship. This portrait challenged ideals of femininity and identity and introduced a conflict between personal autonomy and public entity. I present evidence in the form of the conflicting motivations between Rousseauian principles of simplicity and nature and the artificial formality of French royal portraiture, as well as the increasing globalization of the luxury trades in the last years of the *ancien regime* in the wake of French Colonialism, arguing that Marie-Antoinette's attempt to assert her individuality through her clothing and image as a means of self-representation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Francis Classe, for support in all realms both earthly and spiritual. You have kept me going, even when it appeared as if was I going nowhere.

Additionally, I wish to thank the following people by name:

Dr. Miles Lambert, head curator of Platt Hall, for graciously allowing me to spend two days climbing on his office furniture in order to study the chemise gown.

Cassidy Percoco, Kendra van Cleave, and Francis Classe (again) for their help with French translations when my French failed me.

And finally:

Katherine Adrian, Anandamayi Arnold, Debbie Baskerville, Trystan L. Bass, Hillery Brewer, Kimberly Butler, D. Cardillo, Katherine Caron-Greig, Aurora Celeste, Danine Cozzens, Loren Dearborn, Angela Demutskiy, Lindsey Eastman, Elisa Edgren, Laurie A Gee, Fern L. Goodman, Carolyn Heinz, Amy Karow-Thara, Sandra Linehan, Crystal Marinelli, Leia Mehlman, Anne Merritt, Tamara Norris, Dorothy O'Hare, Amy Osterholm, Merja Palkivaara, Laura Parker, Betsy Hanes Perry, Candace Rossi, Stacy Sandstedt, Athena Smith, Annette Sousa, Heather Uebel, Kendra Van Cleave, Lisa VandenBerghe, Erin Weathers, Molly Weiss, Linda Wenzelburger, Toni Whyte, Amy Wojciechowski, Heidi Wordhouse, and Lillian Young for their financial support of my research in England, friendship, and encouragement. Thank you!

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INTRODUCTION

Previous analyses¹ of Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun's 1783 portrait of Marie-Antoinette, titled *La Reine en gaulle*, have investigated contemporary late-eighteenth-century perspectives of the queen, whose popularity continued to decline throughout the 1780s (Figure 1).



Figure 1. After Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, *Marie-Antoinette (La Reine en gaulle)*, after 1783. Oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Numerous feminist authors have critically examined the rules and expectations regarding fashion for eighteenth-century queens and Marie-Antoinette's rejection of

¹ The definitive works on the 1783 portrait of Marie-Antoinette were authored by Mary D. Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and the Cultural Politics of Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), and "The Portrait of a Queen" in *Marie-Antoinette: Writings on the Body of a Queen* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

those expectations to her detriment in the eyes of her subjects.² However, few have addressed how Marie-Antoinette fashioned her identity through the simplification of personal adornment. The image of the Queen of France with towering powdered wig and enormous silk gown was not the image that Marie-Antoinette, as an individual, identified with. Instead, there is a distinct legacy of simplification in Marie-Antoinette's tenure as queen, from her well-documented difficulties in accepting the elaborate rituals performed at Versailles, to her rejection of powerful courtiers in favor of commoners, all the way down to the clothes she chose to wear and the portraits she chose to be displayed.

Perhaps no other fashion was so strongly attached to Marie-Antoinette's "simple country maid" persona as the dress that came to bear her title. In 1783, the queen's favorite painter, Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, executed a portrait of Marie-Antoinette dressed in the *chemise à la reine* and exhibited it publicly at the Académie. This portrait caused uproar among the public because of the queen's unconventional clothing, and was decried as a depiction of the queen in her underwear.³ The portrait was withdrawn and replaced with a similar portrait by Vigée-Lebrun of the queen, this time wearing more conventional attire (Figure 2).⁴

² Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman*, 167-168.

³ Mylynka D'Ann Kilgore-Mueller, "Manipulating Maria: Marie-Antoinette's Image From Betrothal to Beheading and Beyond," Thesis (M.A.), University of Texas at Arlington, 2008. <http://hdl.handle.net/10106/1003>, 17-18.

⁴ William Henry Helm, Louise-Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, *Vigée-Lebrun, 1755-1842: Her life, Works, and Friendships* (London: Hutchison, 1915), 210-211. Also, Mary D. Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 143-145.



Figure 2. Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, *Marie-Antoinette with a rose*, 1783. Oil on canvas, Petit Trianon, Palace of Versailles. Reprinted with Permission.

In order to understand the complicated and nuanced world that Marie-Antoinette and her cohorts operated in, providing guideposts along the route is essential to distilling the thousands of documents dealing with her life that are in existence. The subject matter of this thesis, the *chemise à la reine*⁵, is often treated as a slight diversion along that route; worth remarking on, but not substantial enough to investigate. What one quickly realizes,

⁵ Translated literally as “the queen’s blouse,” the word French word “*chemise*” is better understood to be representative of an undergarment known by the same name.

however, is that there is far more to the queen's little white dress than presumed. The *chemise à la reine* is the center of the Venn diagram that is composed of three intricately connected spheres: display, social class, and gender.

I have broken this thesis into three chapters that deal with each of the above spheres. The first chapter, "Royal Portraiture and the Court," I investigate Rousseau's influence on late-eighteenth-century ideas concerning individuality and self-fashioning, which was diametrically opposed to the monolithic society to which Marie-Antoinette belonged, that of the tradition-obsessed court at Versailles. Rousseau's Sophie, in her simple white frock and single ribbon in her unpowdered hair, represented a turning point for the Third Estate, particularly where the female image was concerned. Sophie existed unfettered by convention, and, as we will see, Marie-Antoinette did not have the same luxury of freedom—where the natural world collided most obviously with the artificial was in the realm of royal portraiture.

The chapter "Scandal, Social Class, and Fashion" deals with the ripple effect of Vigée-Lebrun's portrait of the queen *en gaulle*, illustrating through words and image how the public's perception of Marie-Antoinette altered in the wake of the 1783 Paris Salon. The chemise gown's association with Creole women is put forth as one possible explanation for why the Paris elite recoiled with distaste at the image of the queen in similar dress; was it racism that tainted Marie-Antoinette's new fashion? Perhaps. But, as we shall see, the undercurrent of racial inequality was not the only force at work—the gown's association with courtesans and controversial women also played a part in how the public perceived the *gaulle* and any woman who wore it. It was only through the

queen that this simple white dress transcended class and race, becoming intricately linked to Marie-Antoinette's very image—an image that was soon appropriated in the famous *affaire du collier*, and with it, the chemise gown.

In the chapter “Gender and Subjectivity,” I examine both Marie-Antoinette's privileged play-acting as a country maid within the private world of the Petit Trianon and how her choice of clothing was affected by her desire for and fascination with comfort and simplicity. This allows us to explore not only her attempt to assert her self image as a private person on the public, but also the visual proof that her detractors claimed of her scandalous, impure nature being depicted in a style of garment understood to be unfit for a queen. Using official and unofficial portraits by the queen's favorite artist Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, as well as slanderous and often pornographic *libels*, we can trace the societal forces that shaped both fashion and the last fifteen years of Marie-Antoinette's life.

To date, relatively few art historians or costume historians have made a complete analysis of this style of dress from its genesis in New World Creole society to its adoption by the Old World Queen of France.⁶ Likewise, little connection has been made between the outraged reaction of Parisian high society to the 1783 portrait that stemmed from both racist and classist associations with the simple white gown, and its association with other controversial women of the time.

⁶ A few authors have hinted at this connection, namely Alice Mackrell, *Art and Fashion*, (London: Batsford, 2005), 39; Madeline Dobie, *Trading Places: Colonization and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century French Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 120; and Caroline Weber, *Queen of Fashion*, (New York: H. Holt, 2007), 150. However, none has adequately investigated the West Indian origin of the *chemise à la reine* and its adoption in European fashionable circles in historiographical terms.

The 1783 Vigée-Lebrun portrait has long intrigued art historians who have identified it as the visual turning point in the decline of Marie-Antoinette's reputation as Queen. However, research has overlooked the humble origins of the chemise gown as a visual signifier of Marie-Antoinette's conflicted relationship with her public status as Queen of France and her desire to be a private individual.⁷ Authors such as Deena Goodman, Caroline Weber, Antonia Fraser, and Mary D. Sheriff have critically examined the expectations of privacy for eighteenth-century queens and Marie-Antoinette's rejection of those expectations to her detriment in the eyes of her subjects, yet no relationship between the clothing, the wearer, the artist, and the public has yet been explored in sufficient detail to marry the inextricably linked worlds of fashion, art, and culture.

I assert that this discourse would benefit from further analysis of imported fashion from the New World into the Old World, an examination both of Marie-Antoinette's privileged play-acting as a country maid within the private world of the Petit Trianon, and of how her choice of clothing was affected by her desire for and fascination with comfort, signified by her adoption of the simple white cotton dress found in the Caribbean. Through this discourse, I will build a case for the larger societal reading of the 1783 Vigée-Lebrun portrait as indicative of Marie-Antoinette's attempt to assert her self-image as a private person on the public. I will further address the claims of her detractors that her scandalous, impure nature was displayed in the choice of garment considered unfit for a queen.

⁷ Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman*, 167-168.

CHAPTER 1: ROYAL PORTRAITURE AND THE COURT

In 1783, the Queen of France commissioned a portrait of herself from her favorite painter, Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun. The queen was attired in a new style of gown then known as a *gaulle*, a dress that had been imported to Paris on the backs of Creole women—the wives, daughters, and mistresses of the French plantation owners who regularly arrived in the capitol city from the West Indies.⁸ Vigée-Lebrun's portrait of the queen *en gaulle* was included in the Paris exhibition of the *Académie du Peintre et Sculpteur* that same year, among several others by the artist—however only the queen's portrait generated scandal regarding the inappropriate nature of the queen's costume. This public backlash required it to be withdrawn from the *Salon* and replaced with a hastily painted portrait nearly identical in pose, but depicting the queen in a blue silk satin gown.⁹ Little explanation has ever been given as to what precisely was the public's problem with the portrait of the queen *en gaulle*, but accusations that her inappropriate and scandalous costume was not befitting the dignity of a reigning queen offer up the question: was the negative reaction against Marie-Antoinette after the public exhibition of Vigée-Lebrun's portrait based on the association of the *chemise à la reine* with Creole culture?

The possibility that Marie-Antoinette appropriated the style of dress of Creole women in the last decade of her life brings a new dimension of complication to what has hitherto

⁸ Antonia Fraser, *Marie-Antoinette: The Journey* (New York: N.A. Talese/Doubleday, 2001), 176.

⁹ No exact date for when the change in portraits occurred has so far been documented, however historian Joseph Baillio suggests that the chemise portrait was replaced with the "*The Queen holding a rose*" in September 1783. As the *Salon de Paris* opened on August 25, 1783, and by December 1783, reports were circulating that the portrait of the queen *en gaulle* had been swapped; Baillio's calculation is plausible.

been a rather conventional discourse on the subject of Marie-Antoinette's self-representation.¹⁰ Now known to historians of fashion as the *chemise à la reine*, she was by no means the only woman who adopted the chemise gown during the last two decades of the eighteenth century, but she was the most visible and controversial. The gown itself was exceedingly simple: a white cotton muslin frock that resembled the undergarment from which its name derives. The list of elite women in France and England who were painted wearing the chemise gown before and after the 1783 portrait by Vigée-Lebrun is long; Vigée-Lebrun herself was commissioned to paint the former mistress of Louis XV, Madame du Barry, *en gaulle*. Both the famous English actress Mary Robinson and her contemporary, the Duchess of Devonshire, received chemise gowns directly from Marie-Antoinette—the former immediately embraced the dress and made it into a sensation in London, while the latter initially balked at the idea of being so lightly clad.¹¹ Yet, even the Duchess gave in and began wearing her chemise gown in public when it appeared she might fall behind in fashion.

However, the problem is not that the style was popular or even that it was controversial because of its association with Marie-Antoinette. It is apparent that the chemise gown was considered an informal fashion for wearing when one was entertaining close friends at home. It was only when the official state portrait of Marie-

¹⁰ Weber, *Queen of Fashion*, 169.

¹¹ Paula Byrne, *Perdita: The Life of Mary Robinson* (Harper Perennia, 2005), 191.

Antoinette *en gaulle* was exhibited in 1783 that the queen crossed an invisible barrier between propriety and impropriety.¹²

ROUSSEAU AND THE *ANCIEN RÉGIME*

In the early-1780s, Marie-Antoinette began to simplify her household; initially this was not owing to a curtailment of the enormous expenditures required to keep the queen suitably housed, attired, and entertained but out of a personal desire for simplicity.¹³ This period of simplification would see the popularization of the “Louis Seize” style of interior decoration that stripped the over-wrought baroque motifs associated with Louis XIV and Louis XV off every surface in favor of elegant geometrical themes based on those of Ancient Greece.¹⁴ Along with the interior spaces occupied by the queen, her taste in clothing leaned increasingly towards simplicity. The *chemise à la reine* fell in keeping with this move towards simplicity in design; it was a simple tube-shaped dress, gathered to the body by drawstrings, and made from cotton muslin imported from exotic locations such as India and the Caribbean and was imminently well-suited for the tastes of a queen desiring to flee from the stifling ritual of Versailles. Marie-Antoinette initially adopted the dress during her second pregnancy in 1781, but kept it fashionable for daywear at the Petit Trianon and other informal settings well after she had given birth.

¹² Weber, *Queen of Fashion*, 169.

¹³ Eventually the queen would be brought to heel for her spendthrift ways in the wake of the *Affaire du Collier* in 1785 and reduced her household expenditures greatly as a result. In the five years preceding the necklace scandal, however, Marie-Antoinette’s passion for simplicity appeared to be purely aesthetic, rather than practical. See: Fraser, *Marie-Antoinette*, 223.

¹⁴ Stefan Zweig, Eden Paul, and Cedar Paul, *Marie-Antoinette: The Portrait of an Average Woman*, (New York: Viking Press, 1933), 106.

Change was in the air: the *ancien régime* instituted by Louis XIV and XV had started to feel dated to the youthful court of Louis XVI. Education was becoming increasingly available to everyone but the poorest laborers in Paris, and the influence of Voltaire and Rousseau had, by the mid-1700s, begun to percolate throughout each level of society. The discourses that emerged at the middle of the long-eighteenth-century are usually typified by the trifecta of Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Voltaire, three of the most famous critics of the *ancien régime*, who, in their respective ways, sought a path towards enlightenment unobstructed by an aristocratic model that had petrified and closed itself off from the people.¹⁵

It is Rousseau's writings on the topic of the "natural man" and "natural woman" that are the most relevant to the scope of this thesis, particularly his novel *Émile, or On Education* (1762), which outlined a new philosophy of education for boys and girls. The focus would no longer be on restricting children's natural tendencies towards play, but on a freer mode of expression that allowed the child to develop his or her character unfettered from binding clothing and rote memorization. Written in novel format, the tract follows the eponymous Émile through childhood and into adulthood, guided by his tutor Jean-Jacques, who relates the story of Émile's life through a regimen of character-building exercises that begin when the boy is barely out of diapers and continues until he

¹⁵ Today, they are grouped together as architects of the Revolution, unified by thought, when in reality, all three men espoused differing views on how to create and manage an ideal society—often to the point of attacking one another in public. Rousseau and Voltaire's mutual rivalry is especially noteworthy for the level of vitriol that both *philosophes* aimed at one another.

marries. Jean-Jacques is strict, but caring, and through a careful curriculum for each stage of the boy's life, creates in Émile the ideal citizen.

Émile is not complete, however, until he is given a female counterpart. It is through this counterpart that Rousseau articulates the basis for what was to become the fashionable education for girls in the late-eighteenth-century, as well as the prescription for simplification in dress that was to develop from the 1780s through to the first years of the nineteenth century. Sophie is from a poor, but honorable family; her mother and father adore her and encourage intellectual pursuits insofar that she is literate. Much more weight is given to her moral character, however, which is demonstrated, not by religious education, but by an authenticity in dress that transcends the need to follow fashion in order to make herself desirable. Sophie's authenticity and her devotion to an imaginary ideal male counterpart embodied by Fénelon's *Telemachus* (1699), which she has read and intends to use as the standard against all her suitors will be judged, set her apart from other young women.¹⁶

In Rousseau's Sophie we see the model young woman, unfettered by jewels and silks, seeking to live simply and honorably, and therefore authentically. Elite women such as Marie-Antoinette likely felt the impact of Rousseau's Sophie, and evidence of this is demonstrated by the queen's attempts to simplify her court, made from the late-1770s to

¹⁶ Rousseau's use of Fénelon's *Telemachus* in this context is hardly surprising: Fénelon appropriated the Greek hero and devised a story that Telemachus, under the tutelage of Mentor (a disguised Minerva), demonstrated the transformation of an impetuous young man into an ideal ruler. Rousseau even refers to himself as Mentor and Émile as Telemachus at one point in the novel.

the late-1780s.¹⁷ It is impossible to know if Marie-Antoinette envisioned herself as a Sophie; however, she was at least cognizant of Rousseau's philosophical impact on French society. Marie-Antoinette's interest in cultivating a private environment was in sync with an idealized and simplified aesthetic that would have fit well within Rousseau's pastoral paradise. Sophie's "kitchen garden" can be found on the grounds of Marie-Antoinette's pleasure dairy Hameau, in contrast to the formal gardens at Versailles with their elaborately groomed topiary.

So, too, has the argument been made that Marie-Antoinette's white muslin dress, the eponymous *chemise à la reine*, could have been a dress that Sophie would have favored for its simplicity and natural, unrestrictive shape.¹⁸ It is this dress in particular that Marie-Antoinette's chose to wear when her portrait was painted by Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun in 1783, and it is this dress that threatened the reputation of the queen when Vigée-Lebrun's portrait caused a scandal at the *Académie Royale du Peintre et Sculpture* that same year. Why did this dress, which was in keeping with the Rousseauian ideal of natural form and unadorned simplicity, cause such uproar? Was it the dress itself, or the woman wearing it?

To begin to answer these questions, we must return to Rousseau and his simple country maid, Sophie. If Rousseau intended for his Émile to become the standard by which the male children of the next generation would be raised, it is Sophie who left a

¹⁷ Carolyn Harris, *Queenship and Revolution in Early Modern Europe: Henrietta Marie and Marie Antoinette*, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 139.

¹⁸ Edward Hundert, "Mandeville, Rousseau and the Political Economy of Fantasy," *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods*, ed. Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger, (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 35.

lasting impression on late-eighteenth-century French culture in terms of the education of young girls. This impact was felt all the way into the royal nursery when Marie-Antoinette's first child, the Princess Royal Marie-Thérèse, was born in 1778. In a letter written to her mother a few months before the birth, Marie-Antoinette described the manner in which French children (or more importantly, her daughter) were brought up. She mentioned that children were no longer swaddled but allowed freedom of movement, and once old enough to go outside, were allowed to play "and end up being there always." In contrast to the mode in which young royal women were brought up in the previous generation, this new "freedom" appears to have been understood by the queen as the norm in her adopted country.¹⁹

Expanding on this, Hundert spells out precisely how fashion was affected by Rousseau, all along the caste system in *ancien régime* France:

Rapidly changing fashions of dress were the most ubiquitous expressions of cultures of consumption, as Rousseau was vividly reminded when his decision to adopt modest attire inspired a fashion craze in Parisian society, soon extending to Versailles, where the queen would don peasant costume to play at being a milkmaid.²⁰

But the play-acting, too, has its roots in Rousseauian philosophy, and Marie-Antoinette was not immune to a cultural revolution that shifted from measuring a man by his material wealth to one that prized moral modesty. Even at the queen's charming dairy Hameau, not coincidentally built the year preceding the debut of Elisabeth Vigée-

¹⁹ Caroline Harris, *Queenship*, 140.

²⁰ Hundert, "Mandeville," 35.

Lebrun's portrait of the queen *en gaulle*, Marie-Antoinette was an actor in an elaborate staging of pastoral idealism.²¹ Meredith Martin relates that:

The queen and her friends were described in Parisian journals attending parties with outrageously 'rustic' hairdos like one [that] resembled an English garden complete with 'enameled prairies, silvery streams,' thatched huts, and flowers kept in vials to preserve freshness.²²

In *Émile*, Rousseau is interested in shaping the lower classes through a radical departure in conventional education, in an attempt to effect a transformation towards a more egalitarian existence. Writing in her memoirs at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Marquise de la Tour du Pin reflected on living through the cultural shift of the Revolution, laying the blame on her fellow aristocrats for their profligate ways: "When society is so corrupt...why should anyone be astonished at excesses among the lower classes, who have been set such a bad example" by the upper classes.²³ Margaret H. Darrow argues that in the wake of the Revolution, noblewomen based their behavior on many of the ideals espoused by Rousseau and "modified it to suit their particular needs as aristocrats, incorporating into it values derived from their own more public experiences in eighteenth-century society."²⁴

Perhaps one of the most surprising aspects of Rousseau's works is that they were universally embraced by all levels of French society in the lead up to and aftermath of the Revolution. The fact that Rousseau's influence could be felt in the very upper echelons of

²¹ Meredith Martin, *Dairy Queens: The Politics of Pastoral Architecture From Catherine de' Medici to Marie-Antoinette* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 182-183.

²² Ibid., 187-188.

²³ Henriette-Lucy, marquise de la Tour de Pin Gouvernet née Dillon, *Memoirs of Madame de La Tour du Pin*, trans. and ed. Felice Harcourt (New York: McCall Publishing Co., 1971), 83.

²⁴ Margaret H. Darrow, "French Noblewomen and the New Domesticity," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1, "Women and Power: Dimensions of Women's Historical Experience" (Spring 1979), 57.

society in the late-eighteenth-century often comes across as confusing in the wake of his modern reputation as one of the architects of the Revolution. In his essay “Virtue and Terror: Rousseau and Robespierre,” historian Connor Cruise O’Brien describes this dichotomy as “nice cop Rousseau” and “bad cop Rousseau,” appealing to both the monarchists and the revolutionaries for different reasons. The “nice cop” was the author of *Émile* and *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, both widely embraced by the upper classes, whereas the “bad cop” had penned what would become the roadmap for the Revolution, *Du Contrat Social*.²⁵ Taking it a step further, Berg and Eger bring identity into play in their essay “The Rise and Fall of Luxury Debates,” writing:

Rousseau’s aspirations had their widest appeal in the later part of the century. His association of commerce and luxury with moral displacement penetrated deep into the psychology of the self. Luxury increased the dependency of the self on the opinion of others. Objects of luxury acquired a new dominion and the power to promote fantasies of identity.²⁶

Ignorant of the larger world outside the realm of Versailles where privation ruled, Marie-Antoinette’s image as a Messalina solidified after the fall of the *ancien régime*. The new regime sought, by whatever means, to reduce Marie-Antoinette to the role of courtesan in order to distance themselves from the excesses of the old court.²⁷ However, this was an image that also persisted inside the royalist camp as well, prior to the Revolution. The French court had apparently regarded Marie-Antoinette’s relaxed

²⁵ Connor Cruise O’Brien, “Virtue and Terror: Rousseau and Robespierre,” *Passion and Cunning, and Other Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), 75.

²⁶ Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger, “The Rise and Fall of Luxury Debates,” *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods*, ed. Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2003), 21.

²⁷ Martin, *Dairy Queens*, 167.

attitude as a threat to the culture of Versailles. For her part, the Princesse de Lamballe, one of the queen's closest friends, is quick to point out in her memoirs that Marie-

Antoinette:

...could do nothing, however beneficial or disinterested, for which she was not either criticized or censured. She had a tenacity of character which made her cling more closely to attachments from which she saw others desirous of estranging her; and this firmness, however excellent in principle was, in her case, fatal in its effects.²⁸

From the start, Marie-Antoinette appears to have elicited a strong affection from many of her closest companions, for she came across as trusting and good-natured to those who knew her well. However, as far as the world outside of her intimate circle was concerned, the perception that she was drawn easily into one intrigue or another made her appear flighty and easily manipulated. It was this lightness of character that seemed to have been responsible for the early skepticism that greeted the young Austrian archduchess before she even stepped foot in France.²⁹ From the very instant the marriage negotiations were ratified, France was dubious that a child of the Holy Roman Empire, marrying into the Bourbon line, would adopt French values.³⁰ They perceived that Maria Theresa, Empress in her own right, might have passed anti-Salic tendencies to her daughter and would attempt to use Marie-Antoinette as a conduit through which she

²⁸ Madame du Hausset, *The Secret Memoirs of Louis XV./XVI, Complete, by Madame du Hausset, an "Unknown English Girl" and the Princess Lamballe, Volume 2* (Paris; Boston: Grolier Society, 1904), 18.

²⁹ Andrew Haggard, *Women of the Revolutionary Era or Some Who Stirred France* (London: S. Paul & Co., 1914), 161.

³⁰ Jeanne Louise Henriette Campan, *Memoirs of the Court of Marie-Antoinette, Queen of France*, English. Floating Press [database online], 2008, 86-87.

could dominate France, or worse yet, invade and conquer France.³¹ The mean-spirited puns that arose almost as soon as the marriage contract was drawn up speak to this anxiety: The young Archduchess was dubbed “*l’Autrichienne*,” or “the Austrian girl.” Later, this cruelly morphed into a pun on the French words for ostrich (*autruche*) and bitch (*chienne*), which the popular press had no end of fun with throughout the 1780s as Marie-Antoinette’s popularity declined even further.³²

Her marriage had been the work of the Duc de Choiseul, a controversial figure at Versailles who had climbed the ranks under the patronage of Louis XV’s royal mistress, la Pompadour, and within six months of Marie-Antoinette’s marriage had been relieved of his duties and sent into retirement.³³ Without Choiseul’s protection and advocacy, Marie-Antoinette was left wide open to the large and powerful anti-Austrian faction at court who viewed her as a physical threat to France.³⁴ Not helping matters was the *abbé* Vermond, who had initially been assigned the young Dauphine’s confessor and tutor by Choiseul, and eventually had become her secretary by the time she became queen. Though French by birth, Vermond was very much the Austrian Empress’ loyal agent in France, exerting a considerable degree of control over Marie-Antoinette in matters that concerned Austria’s interests. A shameless flatterer and charming, Vermond was able to drive a wedge between Marie-Antoinette and those at Versailles who would have otherwise been important allies in her early years as Dauphine. Even Lamballe, whose

³¹ John Hardman, *French Politics 1774-1789: From the Accession of Louis XVI to the Fall of the Bastille*. (London: Longman) 1995, 198.

³² Fraser, *Marie-Antoinette: The Journey*, 453.

³³ *Ibid*, 89.

³⁴ Campan, *Memoirs*, 50.

devotion to Marie-Antoinette was unwavering, heartily disliked the *abbé* and understood the detrimental power he held over the young queen, remarking “In short, he was more culpable in not doing his duty than in the mischief he occasioned, for he certainly oftener misled the queen by his silence than by his advice.”³⁵

Another factor in Marie-Antoinette’s early unpopularity within Versailles was her lackadaisical approach to ceremony. Madame Campan mentions Marie-Antoinette’s independent spirit and relaxed demeanor as fundamentally incompatible with Versailles’ culture of strict observance of stuffy social ritual and fiercely protected hierarchy.³⁶ Marie-Antoinette’s upbringing at Schönbrunn Palace and the considerably more casual culture of the Austrian court conflicted with that of Versailles. The “Versailles of Vienna” in the architectural sense only, court culture at Schönbrunn had a reputation for familiarity and relaxed traditions that did not prepare Marie-Antoinette for the rigid formality that existed at Versailles, nor did her hasty education in the wake of her marriage contract to the Dauphin Louis-Auguste impress upon her the seriousness of the French court’s commitment to ritual.³⁷ The performance of elaborate ceremony was what set Versailles apart from every other kingdom in Europe and no one was expected to enforce it with more conviction than the king and queen themselves.

Having been a younger member of a large family, too, seems to have acquitted Marie-Antoinette with an independence that was praised in Vienna but was perceived as an

³⁵ Du Hausset, *Secret Memoirs*, 309.

³⁶ Campan, *Memoirs*, 100.

³⁷ Campan, *Memoirs*, xxiii.

irreparable character flaw at Versailles.³⁸ She locked horns repeatedly with her chief-lady-in-waiting, the Comtesse de Noailles, who had initially been assigned to her household to educate the dauphine on French court protocol. Rigid and disciplined, the comtesse became known to Marie-Antoinette's circle of friends as "*Madame l'Etiquette*" for her unrelenting attempts to indoctrinate Marie-Antoinette into the Versailles culture where every process from the most basic to the most elevated was performed within view of the court and often with their active participation.³⁹ For every ceremony that Marie-Antoinette exasperatedly denounced as "disagreeable, tiresome," the comtesse redoubled her efforts to force the young woman into the mold of a French Queen.⁴⁰

Not surprisingly, for someone who was unused to every aspect of daily life having a sacrosanct ritual assigned to it, Marie-Antoinette chafed under the pressure to perform these ceremonies day after day without variation or deviation from the script. Her rebellions were perhaps more in keeping with the teenager that she was at the time of her arrival in France, but for the court at Versailles, her willfulness and apparent disrespect for French royal custom fed back into old cultural anxieties regarding the Austrian threat.⁴¹ Madame Campan lays the blame for the antagonism in Marie-Antoinette's early years in France at the feet of her confessor, Vermond, who:

...ridiculed the etiquette of the House of Bourbon incessantly; the young Dauphiness was constantly incited by his sarcasms to get rid of it, and it was he

³⁸ Fraser, *Marie-Antoinette*, 456.

³⁹ Campan, *Memoirs*, 48.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴¹ Campan, *Memoirs*, xiv, 40.

who first introduced her to suppress an infinity of practices of which he could discern neither the prudence nor the political aim.⁴²

As Campan recounts, even the loyal Lamballe admits a certain skepticism that the queen had set aside her Austrian identity and adopted the role of Queen of France convincingly, as is illustrated in her gentle rebuke of her mistress' persistence in using her mother, the Empress, as a guide in all things political and private. At this accusation, the *abbé*, loyal to Maria Theresa above all, interjects on behalf of Marie-Antoinette to scold Lamballe:

Heavens, madame! Would you always have Her Majesty cased up in steel armour, and not take the fresh air, without being surrounded by a troop of horse and foot, as a Field-marshal is when going to storm a fortress? Pray, Princess, not that Her Majesty has freed herself from the annoying shackles of Madame Etiquette... *let her enjoy the pleasure of a simple robe* and breathe freely the fresh morning dew, as has been her custom all her life (and as her mother before, the Empress Maria Theresa, has done and continues to do, even to this day), unfettered by antiquated absurdities! [Emphasis added]

He concluded with a dramatic flourish: "Let me be anything rather than a Queen of France if I must be doomed to the slavery of such tyrannical rules!"

It is readily apparent in this recounting that Vermond is advocating for a less restrictive and more carefree lifestyle, one that is very much in line with Rousseauian naturalism but at odds with Versailles custom. Vermond adds another complicated layer when he invokes Maria Theresa, thereby linking this burgeoning cultural trend towards naturalism to Austrian customs and beliefs.⁴³ Campan finishes the passage with an attempt by Lamballe to remind the queen that her behavior should be unquestionably

⁴² Ibid., 40.

⁴³ For a discussion on the difference between Austrian and French fashion during this period, see Fraser, 17.

French, as “the Sovereigns of France cannot be too circumspect in their maintenance of ancient etiquette to command the dignified respect of a frivolous and versatile people.”⁴⁴

Eventually, Marie-Antoinette realized the necessity of court ceremony at Versailles, but by then the damage had been largely done; many at court had a difficult time believing that she was now a “daughter of France” and had abandoned her wild Austrian ways, much less her interest in promoting Austrian policies through her undiluted influence with the king. Perhaps finding the intellectual side of queenship too complicated and rife with frustration, she appears to have taken refuge in creating her external image through appearance. If she could not *act* French, then she could *look* French.⁴⁵

QUEENSHIP CONVEYED

What does a French queen look like? In order to give context to the negative public reaction to Vigée-Lebrun’s portrait of Marie-Antoinette *en gaulle*, it is necessary to describe the system of court paintings of *ancien régime* queens. This template had its origin in, as Kathleen Nicholson writes, “an artistic theory rooted in the prevailing, largely negative, cultural formulation of the character of womanhood.”⁴⁶ These dictates were set down by Roger de Piles in *The Principles of Painting* (1700-1708) which provided a rigid system of symbolism that began with portraits of the king and filtered

⁴⁴ Du Hausset, *Secret Memoirs*, 341.

⁴⁵ Weber, *Queen of Fashion*, 86.

⁴⁶ Kathleen Nicholson, “The Ideology of Feminine ‘Virtue’: The Vestal Virgin in French Eighteenth-Century Allegorical Portraiture,” *Portraiture: Facing the Subject* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 54.

down through the ranks of society. According to Piles, men were attributed voices that proclaimed virtues of character that were de facto, whereas all portraits of noblewomen:

...Ought to [proclaim] 'I am the wife princess, whose grand air inspires respect and confidence. I am that high-spirited lady, whose noble manners command esteem... I am that virtuous, courteous, and modest lady.'⁴⁷

Inspiration, high spirits, and esteem, Nicholson implies, were the only positive attributes a woman could embody within a portrait. The image of a queen, more importantly, should be unassailable and more representational of the office of queenship than of the individual woman who bore the distinction of the title—to do otherwise risked revealing the vanity and artifice to which all women were naturally inclined.⁴⁸

The stylistic differences between the socially accepted attire of a queen, especially when painted in an official portrait and displayed publically, and the unacceptable attire in Vigée-Lebrun's portrait of Marie-Antoinette *en gaulle* are significant. Portraits of sitting French queens had to adhere to a rigid template of coded imagery designed to convey her royalty, her virtue, and her power derived through her marriage to the king. As we will shortly discover, Vigée-Lebrun's portrait of the queen *en gaulle* adheres to none of these rules.

A portrait by Carl Van Loo of Marie-Antoinette's predecessor, Marie-Leszczyńska, is practically a textbook example of what a French queen's official portrait should be. Marie-Leszczyńska is amplified in size so as to occupy the majority of the viewer's

⁴⁷ Roger de Piles, *The Principles of Painting*, (London: Printed for J. Osborn, at the Golden Ball, in Pater-Noster Row, 1743), 170.

⁴⁸ Nicholson, "The Ideology of Feminine 'Virtue,'" 54.

attention.⁴⁹ Enormous panniers (a type of horizontal hoop skirt) extended the width of her figure four times her natural hip measurement. Her figure has a clear architectural quality to it, causing her to appear less a woman and more like a piece of furniture in the elaborately decorated royal chamber in which she is painted. A large marble bust of King Louis XV looks over her approvingly and affirms her rank as queen. She is a fixed point in his world; every straight line painted on the canvas terminates at her presence (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Carl Van Loo, *Marie Leczinska, Reine de France*, 1747. Oil on canvas, Salon de Mars, Palace of Versailles. Reprinted with permission.

⁴⁹ Pierre de Nolhac, *La reine Marie-Antoinette*, (Paris; etc: Goupil & co; etc., 1898), 147.

Early official court paintings of Marie-Antoinette as queen by Vigée-Lebrun, painted in 1778 and 1779, also follow this template fairly closely, albeit with what could be considered questionable deviations, if not intentional omissions. In the 1778 portrait, the visual cues are all present and accounted for (Figure 4).⁵⁰



Figure 4. Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, *Marie-Antoinette*, 1778. Oil on canvas, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Reprinted with permission.

⁵⁰ Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman*, 151.

Marie-Antoinette is stationed in the center of the frame, alone, her voluminous icy white gown appearing to swallow her hips in an over-stuffed sofa. As if to compensate for the horizontal emphasis of her gown, Vigée-Lebrun props her subject against a giant neoclassical pillar that terminates well above the edge of the canvas. Marie-Antoinette holds a pale pink rose in one hand, a personal symbol that is repeated in the *en gaulle* portrait, and her left hand rests on her pannier, leading the eye towards a crown placed upon a blue velvet pillow on a table beside her. The crown appears almost secondary to the narrative of the piece, but it subtly reminds the viewer that this is the queen. She does not have to regard the viewer; the viewer must regard her. In fact, she looks completely in the opposite direction of the marble bust of Louis XVI which can be barely discerned at the upper-right of the painting and who seems to be glancing down toward her, without nearly as much warmth as his grandfather's bust in the Van Loo portrait of Marie-Leszczyńska. It is an interesting composition, one that hints at the distance and ambiguity that Marie-Antoinette was likely feeling by this point in her tenure at Versailles.

The second portrait, painted the following year, copied almost every element of the 1778 portrait, though Vigée-Lebrun has altered the queen's hairstyle which is no longer perpendicular, leaning more towards the rounded, frizzy shape of the 1780s (Figure 5). Also changed is the expression of the queen, who no longer gazes distantly off to the side of the portrait, but has turned her attention toward the viewer. More of the interior space is illuminated—columns of a temple can be seen beyond the queen. The crown resting on a pillow is still present, but gone from the composition is the reference to Louis XVI. The lack of the king's "presence" in the portrait and her countenance engaging the viewer

with an air of independence speak volumes about a woman coming into her own. And yet, even with these changes, the portrait does not overtly challenge convention, a fact that is supported by the absence of contemporary public reaction to both the 1778 and 1779 portraits.



Figure 5. Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, *Marie-Antoinette*, 1779. Oil on canvas, Palace of Versailles. Reprinted with permission.

By comparison, the 1783 portrait *en gaulle* is a radical departure from the established visual cues expected of a portrait of a Queen of France. Marie-Antoinette is depicted in three-quarter profile, caught in the act of tying a blue silk ribbon around a bouquet of

roses. She is wearing a soft white gown, tied at the waist with a sheer gold striped sash; her sleeves are caught by drawstrings in three locations, terminating with a sheer ruffle just below the elbows that echoes the loosely gathered frill at her neckline. Her hair is carefully styled in the casual *coiffure à l'enfant* (named after she adopted the less cumbersome hairstyle following her third pregnancy in 1781), though powdered, as was still the fashion at the time. A wide-brimmed straw-hat perches jauntily at an angle atop her head, adorned with a wide blue silk ribbon and a plume of grey ostrich feathers. There is no royal crown, no bust of the king gazing approvingly at her, no other visual trappings of queenship aside from, perhaps, the roses.

While a portrait could be commissioned by royalty for any number of reasons, the designation “royal portrait” was bestowed on portraits that were intended to hang in public spaces, viewed by the public, and adhered to the template described above. The portrait *en gaulle* did not follow this template and is decidedly not a “formal portrait”—which raises the question as to whether or not this *informal* portrait was truly “inappropriate.” Portraits commissioned by individuals in the position of power served a wide range of purposes, from diplomatic, to dynastic, to intimate. The portrait *en gaulle* would have been appropriate as a gift to a friend to be hung in private quarters. It was, however, not appropriate to be displayed as a royally commissioned, publicly displayed portrait of a sitting queen. Copies of it were made and sent to various friends of the queen, but the original was one of twelve paintings by Vigée-Lebrun that were featured

in the 1783 *Salon de Peintre et de Sculpture* under the auspices of the *Académie*.⁵¹ As her appointment to the *Académie* in May of 1783 had been achieved through her close relationship with Marie-Antoinette, the artist was almost certainly underscoring her exclusive access to the queen by exhibiting an intimate portrait of her in a public space.⁵² Vigée-Lebrun, in catering to the queen's aesthetic, was complicit with her in creating the image of an unadorned queen.

The official portrait of the queen had an important symbolic purpose in reinforcing her role as the wife of the king. While, as Sheriff notes, the 1783 portrait *en gaulle* was not officially identified as a state portrait, the fact that Vigée-Lebrun was the queen's official painter made this portrait an official record of the queen's image.⁵³ If Vigée-Lebrun expected uproar, she is mum on the topic in *Souvenirs*. In fact, she barely mentions the scandal, only referring briefly to the negative press the portrait generated.⁵⁴

THE QUEEN'S PAINTER AND THE FASHIONING OF A SCANDAL

In late August 1783, the Louvre opened its doors to the public for the bi-annual *Salon du Paris*, the premier art exhibition of the *Académie du Peintre et Sculpture*. Among the history paintings, the still lifes, and the sculpted marble busts of noblemen was a collection of portraits submitted by one of that year's newest members, a twenty-eight-year-old woman named Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun. The centerpiece of that collection was a

⁵¹ Martin, *Dairy Queens*, 203.

⁵² *Correspondence Littéraire*, 13 (1783): 440, as quoted in Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman*, 89, 287.

⁵³ Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman*, 165.

⁵⁴ Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and Geneviève Haroche-Bouzinac, *Souvenirs, 1755-1842*. (Paris: Charpentier, 1869), 13.

slightly larger than life-sized, three-quarter-length portrait of a woman in a white gauze dress wearing a straw hat bedecked with flowers, a blooming pink rose pinched delicately between the fingers of one hand, while the other was in the process of winding a soft blue silk ribbon around its stem. Within a fortnight, it would be removed from display amid controversy, and both sitter and artist would find themselves the subjects of slander with far-reaching implications.

The portrait appeared innocuous enough: the subject was pleasingly attired as if caught in the midst of picking flowers in a garden; she had a pleasant, friendly aspect about her features, with large blue-grey eyes and luminous skin with a naturally rosy glow. Her frizzed hair was powdered and on the cutting-edge of fashionable hairstyles for that year. Glimpsed in the shadowy background was a dark blue neoclassical vase filled with flowers sitting upon a small wooden table with an ornately carved border. That was all. There was nothing tantalizing in her pose, nothing erotic or obviously disrespectful in the way the artist had depicted the lady in oil—on the surface, at least. Beneath the brightly colored glazes, however, there was a coded message that was broadcast to any who happened to look long enough at the portrait.

*

Imagine, for a moment, that we are observing the average salon attendee in late August 1783, as he wanders the Louvre's *Salon Carré*, crowded floor to ceiling with paintings, every usable inch of wall space occupied by a canvas. He pauses before *Hector Mourned by Andromache*, expertly painted by Jacques-Louis David, one of the brightest stars of the current crop of *académiciens*. He considers the brightly and expertly

composed still lifes by Anne Vallayer-Coster, renown for her skill in rendering objects in oils so that they appeared almost ready to topple off the canvas and onto the floor. Then, displayed among the crowded walls, he stops before a portrait that is hung in such a way that it could not be lost amid the cluttered walls—a portrait that has pride of place, hung where no salon-goer could miss it.⁵⁵

Our viewer's eye is drawn to the brass plate affixed to the frame, identifying the sitter as "*La Reine*," the Queen—Marie-Antoinette, to be precise. His eyes then flick back to the canvas, seeking some recognizable aspect of royalty in the clothing, accessories, surroundings, symbols—and finds none. The face is familiar, there is no mistake that it belongs to the queen, but there is nothing else to associate her with her queenship. Not even an allegorical explanation can be given—despite the flowers this is no Flora, no crown of blossoms graces her brow. No, this is the queen as a woman, an ordinary, mortal woman, caught in the act of arranging her garden's bounty. The *queen*? A *gardener*? To a Frenchman who considers France the height of culture, it is further proof that she never fully shed her Austrian ways—such an uncultured people, Austrians.

But then our friend's eyes narrow further as he realizes what she is wearing. He's aware of the current craze among the female half of society for the *robe en gaulle*, a distinctly un-French muslin gown modeled on the sort of dresses worn by the Creole women who have been arriving in droves in Paris—the wives, daughters, and mistresses

⁵⁵ There is no record of the arrangement of the *Salon Carré* for the exhibition of 1783; however engraver Pietro Antonio Martini documented the gallery in the Salon of 1785. Based on the positioning of Adolf Ulrik Wertmüller's portrait *La Reine, M. le Dauphin & Madame, Fille du Roi* (1785) in the prime viewing location, we can infer that *La Reine en gaulle* was likewise given similar prominence.

of French landowners who disembark in the ports wearing frocks so sheer and so without shape that they could be mistaken for wearing only their underwear.⁵⁶ The critics call these dresses *chemises* for that very reason. This outfit is more fitting for a boudoir painting than public display.

As he leaves the gallery, having had his fill, he passes by a boy selling pamphlets at the door. He picks one up and scans the pages and quickly deduces that he is not the only one who feels that Madame Lebrun's portrait of the queen is in poor taste—though the anonymous author of this tabloid is less forgiving in his assessment. The portrait of the queen *en gaulle* is proof, the pamphlet reads, that the queen's moral character is now entirely corrupted by her Sapphic proclivities, her lover the Duchesse de Polignac whose portrait (also by Madame Lebrun and also *en gaulle*) is displayed beside the queen's; the tribades of Trianon, flaunting their wantonness for all to see.⁵⁷

Our friend leaves the Louvre, pamphlet in hand, perhaps not entirely believing of the stories within it, but understanding where they originate. France has never had so unpopular a queen, he reckons. Her disregard for the position she holds, her profligate spending on fleeting amusements while her people starve and struggle under heavy taxes, her only interest her self-interest—yes, there is a kernel of truth to the rumors in the tabloids, that the queen cares only for her pleasure, insulting her husband, the king, and

⁵⁶ Vincent Marie Viénot, Comte de Vaublanc, *Mémoires de M. le comte de Vaublanc*, Ed. M.F. Barrière (Paris: Librairie de Firmin Didot Freres, Fils Etc., 1857), 118-119.

⁵⁷ Though the contents of these pamphlets were not preserved for posterity, we do know that they were considered slanderous and attacked the character of the queen as well as the trio of female artists who were part of the 1783 exhibition, Anne Vallyer-Coster, Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, and of course, Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun. See: Taschereau, Jules A. *Revue Rétrospective, Ou Bibliothèque Historique, Contenant Des Mémoires Et Documens Authentiques Inédits Et Originaux Pour Servir À L'histoire Proprement Dite, À La Biographie, À L'histoire De La Littérature Et Des Arts*. Ed. J.A. Taschereau. 5 tom. (Paris, 1833), 315-316.

France itself by commissioning a portrait showing herself to be no different from the Creole ladies that flutter through Paris in their provocatively sheer dresses. What would be next—the king’s portrait hung in the Louvre showing him with a spade in hand and dirt under his fingernails?

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Coming from the early twenty-first century, with the desire of many for our leaders to be folksy and relatable, it is challenging to grasp why a portrait of a queen wearing a simple white dress would cause such consternation among such a wide swath of French society. In this day and age, Marie-Antoinette’s desire to fashion herself as a common woman would be applauded. In the late-eighteenth-century, however, this was a controversial decision rooted in French tradition and Gallic pride.

There is a distinct sense that just prior to the French Revolution, Marie-Antoinette was damned if she did, and damned if she didn’t. Having lived for the better part of a decade with accusations that she spent too much money on clothing, jewelry, and lavish parties, the queen endeavored to adopt a more simplified, if not entirely sedate way of life—the *chemise à la reine* came into existence during that period. However simple it appeared on the surface, her household continued to hemorrhage money, having traded one luxury for another: instead of gowns of Lyon silk, the Queen had developed a taste for expensive imported muslin. Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun’s 1783 portrait of the queen *en gaulle* was an abortive attempt by Marie-Antoinette at portraying herself as the embodiment of Rousseau’s Héloïse, capitalizing on a fashionable appreciation for simplicity without truly adopting it. Ultimately, that advertising campaign backfired

almost immediately. Within days of the exhibition's opening, slanderous pamphlets were being hawked outside the *Salon Carré* where Vigée-Lebrun's portrait was displayed. The backlash from the Paris elite rose to such fervor that the portrait of the queen *en gaulle* was withdrawn and another portrait of the queen by Vigée-Lebrun—this time dressed more appropriately in a blue gown of French satin—replaced it.

The cards were also stacked against Vigée-Lebrun, though she suffered less in the backlash than the queen, who took the brunt of the public outrage. Vigée-Lebrun had been a fixture in Parisian society for years and though her talent as a portraitist was without question, she was still barred from admission into the *Académie du Peintre et Sculpteur*—the stated reason was that she was the wife of an art dealer, a conflict of interest and a potential unfair advantage over other members. This rule was hardly new, but it was convenient—the first painter of the *Académie*, Jean-Baptiste Marie Pierre, was no friend of hers, and Lindsay Meehan Dunn posits that the truth of the matter was simply that he did not want her in the ranks—whether out of professional jealousy, political rivalry, or good old-fashioned misogyny.⁵⁸ A letter from King Louis XVI to the *Académie*, insisting that Vigée-Lebrun be admitted, resolved the matter. Pierre abstained from the vote, making clear his displeasure with the entire affair, and with that objection sidelined, Madame Lebrun was accepted. The order from the king was a highly unconventional route for an *académicienne*; the *Académie's* jury accepted fellow female artists Adélaïde Labille-Guiard and Anne Vallayer-Coster in the same year, without issue

⁵⁸ Lindsay Meehan Dunn, *Conditional Acceptance: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and the Académie Royale* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms International, 2008), 23.

or royal involvement. Only Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, with her close friendship to Queen Marie-Antoinette, required royal pressure for her acceptance.

The reasons behind the *Académie's* reluctance to admit Vigée-Lebrun are not clearly stated and one feels their problem with her husband's profession was more of a smokescreen for the real issue. Mary D. Sheriff suggests that one potential problem the *Académie* had was how Vigée-Lebrun wished to be viewed as an artist and *académicienne*. Within the *Académie's* hierarchy, the lower ranks were allotted to portraitists, landscape artists, and painters of still life—any one of these designations would be acceptable for an *académicienne*. However, the highest, noblest form of art was history painting, and that domain was exclusively masculine—the most significant reason being that women were forbidden to study nudes, and nudes, most importantly of the male variety, were central to the genre.

According to Sheriff, Vigée-Lebrun was not content to remain in the lower ranks as a portraitist—she set her sights on being classed as a history painter. The problem with the male nude figure was certainly a stumbling block, but she took advantage of the unique circumstances of her acceptance and was able to include an allegorical painting in her submission to the *Salon* of 1783 that blurred the line between history and portrait painting. Rather than submit a portfolio to the jury the same day as her confirmation, Vigée-Lebrun was given a “conditional acceptance” with the instruction that her portfolio was to be submitted a month later. This was likely a way for the *Académie* to tacitly confirm her acceptance and sweep the entire controversy under the rug. When she returned with her portfolio on May 31, 1783, Vigée-Lebrun was able to slip *Peace*

Bringing Back Abundance in amongst the royal portraits and the *Académie*, with her rival Pierre abstaining, voted to allow its inclusion in the *Salon* in three month's time.

Considering its status as a history painting, the inclusion of *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* in the *Salon* should have been the scandal that rocked the Parisian art world the summer of 1783. In reality, the painting was received with approval from the public, as written in the *Loterie pittoresque pour le Salon de 1783*:

Several critics, to diminish the artist's reputation, say that Madame Le Brun, having greater access than most to the finest models, had done nothing more than copy. They claim to discern in her painting the influence of Guido, Cortona, Santerre, etc.; but this merely proves that she has copied none of them. If she has sought to imitate them, nothing is more legitimate; this is even one of the tenets of Art. Let us allow that this work does great honor to Madame Le Brun, & that a larger composition, painted like these two figures, would scarcely take second place to that which is most beautiful.⁵⁹

Instead, it was the portrait of the queen *en gaulle* that engendered public censure. Vigée-Lebrun writes some twenty years after the *Salon* of 1783 "when [*La Reine en gaulle*] was exhibited at the *Salon*, malicious folk did not fail to make the remark that the queen had been painted in her chemise... and calumny was already busy concerning her."⁶⁰

Another critic wrote in *Mémoires Secrets*, "Many people have found it offensive to see these august persons revealed to the public wearing clothes reserved for the privacy of their palace."⁶¹ Fellow *académicienne* Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, whose paintings were

⁵⁹ *Loterie pittoresque pour le Salon de 1783*, 22-23.

⁶⁰ Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, *Souvenirs*, 13.

⁶¹ Louis Petit de, Mathieu-François Pidansat de Mairobert Bachaumont and Barthélemy-François-Joseph Mouffle d'Angerville, *Mémoires secrets ou Journal d'un observateur. Tome XXIV, Tome XXIV*. (Clermont-Ferrand: Ed. Paleo, 2009), 5.

hung with Vigée-Lebrun's and Anne Vallayer-Coster's, was prompted to ask the dramatist Jean-François Ducis to intercede on their behalf to stop slanderous pamphlets attacking the queen's portrait and her character from being sold at the door to their gallery.⁶² Marie-Antoinette's visage was so well known, and her role as queen was so enmeshed in her identity, there was no mistaking her for a simple countrywoman.

Reading the portrait *en gaulle* in this context, it is clear that the queen's public image was suffering. The French expected their queen to be distant, aloof, unengaged in anything other than perhaps piety and bearing male heirs. What they got in Marie-Antoinette was an Austrian—the natural enemy of France—who sought acceptance without understanding its source, who failed to produce a child in her first seven years in France, and who gravitated to pleasure-seeking behavior when given half a chance.⁶³ The portrait *en gaulle* was the proof that the public needed to conclude that Marie-Antoinette was more invested in play-acting the role of a shepherdess than in taking the role of queen seriously.

⁶² Taschereau, *Revue Rétrospective*, 315-316. ⁶³ Sarah Maza, "The Diamond Necklace Affair Revisited," *Marie-Antoinette: Writings on the Body of the Queen* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 74.

⁶³ Sarah Maza, "The Diamond Necklace Affair Revisited," *Marie-Antoinette: Writings on the Body of the Queen* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 74.

CHAPTER 2: SCANDAL, SOCIAL CLASS, AND FASHION

The focus on Vigée-Lebrun's 1783 portrait of Marie-Antoinette *en gaulle* has been seen as a turning point in the artist's career; so too, has the portrait been examined as the catalyst for the beginning of the Queen's downfall. The symbolic nature of the white cotton dress, the antithesis of eighteenth-century queenly attire, brought a wave of criticism crashing down upon the monarchy. The *chemise à la reine* became an example of how out of touch with the realities of her station Marie-Antoinette had become. Within a year of the portrait debuting at the 1783 *Salon*, the chemise gown began to gain popularity, not just among the fashionable elite, but also as a visual signifier of the Queen herself in pornographic pamphlets, and the dress had a starring role in one of the biggest scandals of the decade, the *affaire du collier*.

In 1785, a scandal gripped Paris that directly implicated the queen's taste for the *chemise à la reine*; known as *Le Affair du Collier*; it was an elaborate scam to dupe the Cardinal de Rohan out of thousands worth in diamonds by using a decoy dressed as Marie-Antoinette in a darkened garden to beg the Cardinal for the funds to purchase a magnificent diamond necklace. So heavily associated with the queen was the *chemise à la reine* that the con artists behind the affair dressed their Marie-Antoinette impersonator in a chemise gown to better fool the gullible Cardinal de Rohan.⁶⁴

Vilified during her lifetime as an inveterate spendthrift and easily moved by the most extreme fashions, Marie-Antoinette's reputation as a tastemaker has long been discussed

⁶⁴ Mary Sheriff, "The Portrait of the Queen," *Marie-Antoinette: Writings on the Body of a Queen*, ed. Dena Goodman (New York: Routledge, 2003), 36.

through the succeeding centuries.⁶⁵ Recent scholarship has begun to address Marie-Antoinette's complicated role as both royal wife and, absent an official royal mistress to act as the outlet for the king's sexual needs, the vessel through which female sexual desire and power was manifested. This virgin/whore distinction in culture of the *ancien regime* left a French public used to seeing the sexual power of the king performed with a woman other than his wife with no other choice but to insert the queen into the role the royal mistress would have held.⁶⁶ As a result, the sexuality of the queen became not just a critique of when she would bear the heir to the throne which was her only official duty, but instead left wide open for criticism her pleasure-seeking escapism when royal heirs did not issue forth from the royal womb in a timely manner.⁶⁷

FROM OLD WORLD TO NEW, LOW FASHION TO HIGH

Now that we have given context to the portrait *en gaulle* as it was received in 1783 Paris, we must now ask whether the *gaulle* itself played a part in the scandal, beyond the sensual transparency of its Indian cotton. Where exactly did the chemise gown originate and how did it arrive in Marie-Antoinette's possession? Nineteenth-century historian Germain Bapst offers a tantalizing clue in an article published in *The Cosmopolitan* in August 1894:

⁶⁵ This debate began shortly after Marie-Antoinette left Austria to marry the French Dauphine Louis Auguste, in 1770. Although out of the immediate control of her mother, the Empress Maria Theresa sent regular missives to her daughter lecturing her to be more circumspect in her attire, as word traveled to Austria of Marie-Antoinette's fashion choices. For an in-depth analysis of Marie-Antoinette's relationship to, and impact on, fashion, see Weber, *Queen of Fashion*.

⁶⁶ Maza, "The Diamond Necklace Affair," 79-80.

⁶⁷ Martin, *Dairy Queens*, 206.

A young female artist sketched Marie-Antoinette in the costume which she wore in the dairy, and had written above the engraving made from her sketch the words, “The pretty countrywoman” (*La jolie fermière*). It was then fashionable for ladies to wear in the country a simple white gown, called *gaulle*. A short time before, a fleet had brought to France negresses from St. Domingo. People thronged to see [the negresses]... The queen had, like everyone else, been struck by the whiteness of the linen of those women, and the simplicity of their gowns.⁶⁸

Bapst’s reference to the “negresses from St. Domingo” is likely derived from the *Mémoires de M. le comte de Vaublanc*, which had enjoyed a popular print run in 1857, and which detailed the life of Vincent Marie Viénot, comte de Vaublanc (1756-1845).⁶⁹ Vaublanc, a member of the French aristocracy, born in Saint-Domingue, spent the latter half of his life in France as one of the few monarchist deputies during the Reign of Terror and the *Directoire*. In his *Mémoires*, Vaublanc describes his arrival in Paris in 1782, along with Creole women dressed in “beautiful linen clothes,”⁷⁰ remarking on the bright white of these dresses as particular to the region of Saint-Domingue. He recounts how the queen was intrigued by the beauty of this “*l’habillement américain*” and shortly thereafter “often appeared dressed” in these brilliant white gowns, which incurred “severe and malicious criticism...[saying] that in France, a queen was never to dress so simply.”⁷¹ However, given the definitive dating of portraits by Vigée-Lebrun featuring the chemise gown in 1781 and 1782, it can be inferred that Marie-Antoinette may have already been aware of this fashion prior to 1782.

⁶⁸ Germain Bapst. “Marie Antoinette in Petit Trianon.” *The Cosmopolitan*, August 1, 1894, 398.

⁶⁹ Vaublanc, *Mémoires*, 118.

⁷⁰ Chemise gowns were made of a wide range of lightweight plain weave textiles including linen lawn, cotton muslin, and linen or cotton voile. References to the fiber are often indicative of the type of weave used. In this case, Vaublanc is likely referring to linen lawn, which was produced locally in the West Indies.

⁷¹ Viénot, *Mémoires*, 118-119.

Likewise, the origin of the term “*gaule*” is vague. It is tempting to draw a connection from “*gaule*” to its cognate, “*gaulle*,” inferring an association with perhaps a sense of Gallic nationalism, which in later decades of the eighteenth century certainly played a part in a growing nationalistic pride in France. As the *gaule* morphed into later incarnations identified as the *robe en gaulle*, et cetera, it ultimately becomes the simple Grecian-inspired muslin gown popularized throughout the Reign of Terror and the First Napoleonic Empire. Tracing the visual lineage left to us in the fashion plates between 1780 and 1800 demonstrates a progression from a Neoclassical muslin gown to Directoire styles. So, where, then, does the term *gaule* come from?

One interesting connection that links the historical recounting of Creole women disembarking in Paris from Saint-Domingue with the word is the presence of a modern white cotton dress known as a “*golle*” or “*gaule*” still worn in some Caribbean islands as a form of Creole national dress. Described as the “easiest of dresses, the cinctureless *gaule* or long white dressing gown,” in an 1869 review of Creole Grammar in *Spectator*, this points to a Creole origin for the chemise gown and its occasional name, the *robe en gaule*.⁷²

Raising the question of a Caribbean origin for the chemise gown deviates drastically from the established narrative that the dress came to the queen by way of Marie-Antoinette’s dressmaker, Rose Bertin. Colonial historian Madeline Dobie instead offers the possibility of a New World origin, writing:

⁷² Faith Smith, *Creole Recitations: John Jacob Thomas and Colonial Formation in the Late Nineteenth-Century Caribbean* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 106.

In the Antilles, where the warm, humid climate made light cotton clothing a desirable choice, ‘simple tubes of white muslin had for some time been worn by ladies on the plantations.’ ... The indigo used to blue-rinse muslin to a startling whiteness also came from the colonies.⁷³

Dobie’s reference to the indigo rinse that gave white fabrics a brilliance uncommon in Europe at the time is supported by Vaublanc’s account of the Creole women in 1782. He describes the bright white gowns of these ladies causing a sensation among Parisian women, who had never seen anything like it before.⁷⁴

Further support for the Caribbean origin of the chemise gown can be found in the paintings of Agostino Brunias, an Italian painter working within the English plantation system in the West Indies, specifically Saint-Domingue, Barbados, and Jamaica. Working for the English government and wealthy plantation owners stationed in the Caribbean, Brunias seems to have focused more intently on representing Creole society than strictly white, European settlers. His interest in documenting Creole society in the West Indies provides us with a tantalizing visual connection to the chemise gown in its early form.

In “Marketing Mulatresses in the Paintings and Prints of Agostino Brunias,” Kay Dian Kriz describes *Linen Market, Dominica*, painted around 1780:

With his customary attention to sartorial detail, the artist displays an undulating frieze of various individuals buying and selling at the portside Sunday market in Roseau, where domestically produced fruits and vegetables are sold alongside linens imported from Europe. Scanning the colorfully dressed crowd, the viewer’s eye is drawn to the centrally placed woman dressed in white and shaded by a bright pink parasol. She is both like and unlike Brunias’s typical mulatta figure, as exemplified by the brightly dressed woman on the left wearing a straw hat set rakishly atop her checkered turban. The skin of the woman in white is pointedly lighter than that of her dark-skinned servant, but not markedly different in hue

⁷³ Dobie, *Trading Places*, 120..

⁷⁴ Vaublanc, *Mémoires*, 119.

from that of the mulatto woman on the left or the female figure standing at the right, holding a vegetable.⁷⁵

The central figure in *Linen Market, Dominica* is identified as a Creole woman, probably of the wealthy plantation class. She wears what we can assume to be a white *gaule*, unbelted at the waist but form-fitting at the sides of the body, most likely through the use of drawstrings. The gown falls to the ground in a ruffled hem, and the woman lifts her skirt slightly to reveal a fashionable red shoe beneath.⁷⁶ Though her hair is, for the most part, concealed, she wears a towering turban that visually mimics the tall hairstyles of the European court (Figure 6).

⁷⁵ Kay Dian Kriz, "Marketing Mulatresses in the Paintings and Prints of Agostino Brunias." *The Global Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 209.

⁷⁶ Steeve O. Buckridge, *The Language of Dress: Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaica, 1760-1890* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2004), 62. Buckridge quotes an English transplant to the Caribbean colonies describing the dress of Creole women he observed at the races: "The females in muslins and ribbons of the gayest colours with caps and turbans of the smartest silks and stuffs, silk stockings and always red shoes, to which the shortness of their dresses gave ample display, and above all, the gay parasols of green or pink, which the sable beauties displayed with infinite pride. . ."



Figure 6. Agostino Brunias, *Linen Market (Detail)*, 1775. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

Except for the differences in sleeve styles, this Creole lady's dress is strikingly similar to the queen's *gaulle*. Appearing at once to be form-fitting and yet loose enough to afford the body freedom of movement, this could be accomplished by the use of drawstrings in the bodice of the gown. Indeed, this is the case in the only extant chemise gown from the early 1780s at Platt Hall in Manchester, UK. Three drawstrings close the

neck, the bust, and the waist of the Manchester chemise, allowing for the fit of the bodice portion of the dress to be easily adjusted as needed.⁷⁷

The differences between the dresses in *Linen Market, Dominica*, the portrait of the queen *en gaulle*, and the Platt Hall *chemise à la reine* represent individual adaptations of the same basic style. The relaxed nature of clothing in the Caribbean was a simple necessity for existing in the tropical heat, however Buckridge notes that, at least as far as the English plantation settlers were concerned, casting off their European fashions which were unsuited to the hot, humid weather was not an option.⁷⁸

Hidden in this reluctance to adopt clothing suited to the Caribbean climate is, of course, the understanding that class fashion was to be a visual signifier of the supposed looser morals of Caribbean women.⁷⁹ The Creole seductress, in her light cotton dress, was a well-traversed trope during the eighteenth century, one that would, in short order, topple with the triumph of the Creole mistress over the French queen with the most noble lineage—Josephine Bonaparte, Empress of France, and the successor of sorts to Marie-Antoinette, came from the Caribbean island of Martinique.

THE FASHION OF SCANDAL

The *chemise à la reine*, as has already been described, was every bit as foreign an article at the French court as the queen herself was. As such, it is important to underscore

⁷⁷ There is no supporting evidence that Marie-Antoinette used the chemise gown during pregnancy; despite its association with at least one other pregnant woman in her circle, the Comtesse d'Atrois, however the style's persistence throughout the final two decades of the eighteenth century among European elite women at the time argues convincingly for the acknowledged practicality of the style.

⁷⁸ Buckridge, *The Language of Dress*, 63-64.

⁷⁹ Kriz, "Marketing Mulatresses," 210.

that outside of the vacuum of Versailles, the theory of pastoral idealism was taking root at the doorstep of the *ancien régime*. For all the expectation that she be immune to passing fads, Marie-Antoinette gleefully embraced the gown's pared down aesthetic, when and where she could.

One powerful factor in the public outcry against the chemise gown was that the queen had popularized it to the detriment of the French silk industry.⁸⁰ Frequently made from *mousseline*, or muslin, a light, airy cotton fabric that came to France from the Orient, it may be difficult for modern audiences to understand the controversy surrounding the importation of such a fabric.⁸¹ Valerie Steele discusses the uproar caused by the 1783 portrait *en gaulle*, including the outrage expressed by the Lyons silk industry that had enjoyed a century of royal patronage and now found itself being passed over in favor of simple plain weave fabrics imported from India, the Caribbean, and other foreign countries. The implication, of course, was that the Queen of France must patronize French industry; to do otherwise was to reveal her traitorous impulses.⁸²

The anonymous editor of the 1818 English translation of Madame Campan's memoirs, writes that many years after the queen's downfall, Campan "would show (to trusted friends), with emotion, a plain muslin gown which the queen had worn, and which was made from a part of Tippoo Saib's [sic] present" of the fine, semi-transparent

⁸⁰ Madeline Dobie, *Trading Places: Colonization and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century French Culture*, 119. Dobie suggests that the name derives from Mosul, Iraq.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁸² Valerie Steele, *Paris Fashion: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 37-38.

mousseline.⁸³ Tipu Sahib was the ruler of the Kingdom of Mysore, what is now present-day Bangladesh. In 1788, he sent three ambassadors to Paris to ask for assistance against the English; this fabric may have been gifted to Marie-Antoinette as part of the negotiations.⁸⁴ The gift from the ruler of Mysore is a good indication that one such source for the manufacture and import of textiles for these gowns was the present-day Indian subcontinent, and accordingly, the Manchester chemise gown is made of a style of woven cotton known as “jamdani” that is still woven in exclusively in Bangladesh.⁸⁵ Africa and other Asian countries round out the list of common non-French sources for cotton and linen goods.⁸⁶ The textile exports from French Caribbean colonies, which were likely small at this point, focused instead on tobacco production, but Dobie also cites “the cultivation of cotton...in France’s plantation colonies contributed to the rising popularity of cotton in the second half of the eighteenth century” as one more source for the fiber.⁸⁷

To be sure, the issue at hand was that muslin, a cotton weave, was considered a foreign luxury item to the French, whether the cloth was imported whole from Asia, the Middle East, or English- controlled Caribbean islands, or the staple fibers were sent from the colonies to be woven on French soil.⁸⁸ Further, this type of fabric was typically white, a color that already had luxury connotations associated with it. For centuries, an entire

⁸³ Campan, *Memoirs*, xivi.

⁸⁴ Meredith Martin, “Tipu Sultan’s Ambassadors at Saint-Cloud: Indomania and Anglophobia in Pre-Revolutionary France,” *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Spring-Summer 2014).

⁸⁵ Collection card, *Chemise à la reine*, Manchester City Galleries, Platt Hall, Manchester, United Kingdom. April, 2014.

⁸⁶ Daniel Roche, *The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the Ancien Régime*. (New York : Cambridge University Press, 1994), 446.

⁸⁷ Dobie, *Trading Places*, 119.

⁸⁸ Weber, *Queen of Fashion*, 153.

industry surrounded the specialization of laundering white clothing to preserve whiteness, a color that was difficult to maintain when it came into frequent contact with the body. Another consideration regarding the fabric used for the chemise gown is that it was very lightweight, almost transparent. Such a fabric is delicate and shows wear and tear easily. The cost of such a fragile fabric to be made into a gown indicates that this was not a fabric that could be worn while doing any practical work.⁸⁹ In other words, one had to be of a certain income bracket to be able to afford the purchase and maintenance of such a gown, despite the appearance of humble simplicity.

Madame Campan, always keen to note the minutiae of Marie-Antoinette's daily life, remarks that even though the queen cycled through costly gowns throughout the year, discarding or giving away the vast majority when the season was over, she held on to her muslin gowns in particular.⁹⁰ We can infer from this a certain sentimentality held by the queen for these simple, lightweight frocks, while the more elaborate court gowns of heavy satins and excessive trimmings were simply a means to an end in appeasing court convention.

THE AFFAIR OF THE NECKLACE AND SCANDALOUS CHARACTERS

Another way that the portrait *en gaulle* negatively impacted the image of the queen can be seen in the *Affaire du Collier*, a scandal that held Paris' undivided attention in 1785-1786. As the name implies, the scandal had to do with a necklace—not just any necklace, but a great diamond-studded festoon commissioned in 1771 by Louis XV from

⁸⁹ Weber, *Queen of Fashion*, 159.

⁹⁰ Campan, *Memoirs*, 286.

the Parisian jewelers Boehmer and Bassenge for his then-mistress Madame du Barry. The necklace's worth was estimated at 2,000,000 livres by the time it was ready to be delivered; however, the king had died of smallpox in the three years it took to source the 647 gemstones, polish and cut each, and then set them into the elaborate white gold settings. Louis XV's mistress had been cast out from court, and a new king and queen were occupying the thrones. The necklace was offered numerous times to Marie-Antoinette and each time she declined, stating it was too expensive (given her reputation for profligate spending, this must have come as a surprise) and not to her taste. With the threat of bankruptcy looming, the jewelers began looking for other buyers, but without success.

Enter the comtesse de Valois, otherwise known as Jeanne de la Motte. Despite her grand title, which was later discovered to be false, de la Motte eked out a living conning the Parisian elite with the help of her husband and, remarkably, her lover. In 1783, after attempts to petition the queen for a royal pension had failed, she became the mistress of a prince of the vastly wealthy Rohan family, Cardinal Louis de Rohan. The cardinal, it was soon discovered, had been exiled from the queen's presence for years owing to his tendency to support factions that were in opposition to Marie-Antoinette. Several years out of the inner circle at Versailles had caused Cardinal Rohan to reconsider his priorities, and he had been seeking the queen's forgiveness in hopes of being accepted back into court; Marie-Antoinette, however, was not predisposed towards forgiving him and had rebuffed every attempt at reconciliation. By the time that Jeanne de la Motte had entered his life, Cardinal Rohan was getting desperate.

Recognizing that she could use the cardinal's desperation to her advantage, de la Motte paid a forger to compose letters from the queen to herself, speaking of a willingness to consider a change of heart towards Cardinal Rohan, provided he could prove his allegiance to her. It seemed she had her heart set on a certain necklace, but knowing that she would risk censure from all and sundry for purchasing such an expensive piece, she had been forced to repeatedly decline the jewelers. If Rohan could purchase the necklace on her behalf, she would gladly repay him and restore him to her favor.⁹¹

Believing the letters to be authentic, the cardinal leapt into action, and a rendezvous between "the queen" and Rohan was organized by de la Motte. It was set to take place under the cover of night in a garden; the queen would slip away from her attendants and meet the cardinal in secret in order to verbally confirm the plan to purchase the necklace. In reality, de la Motte had found a Parisian prostitute, Marie Nicole le Guay d'Oliva (most commonly referred to as "Nicole Leguay" in contemporary literature), who bore enough of a resemblance to Marie-Antoinette to pass inspection in a dark garden, shrouded by shadows. She dressed Leguay in "a robe à l'enfant,"⁹² or a *gaule*, a kind of garment now known as the chemise."⁹³ An engraving by André Pujos accompanying the 1786 publication *A Paris: Chez la veuve de Lagardette*, which devotes several chapters to

⁹¹ Dunn, *Conditional Acceptance*, 10-11.

⁹² This is possibly confusion between the *coiffeur à la enfant*, which was the hairstyle that Marie-Antoinette adopted around the same time as the *gaule*. However, a wide variety of alternate names for the *gaule* were used during the period it was fashionable, so we cannot rule out that it is yet another alternate name.

⁹³ Jean Blondel, Le Guay, Marie Nicole. *Mémoire Pour La Demoiselle Le Guay D'Oliva, ..., Accusée; Contre M. Le Procureur Général, Accusateur; En Présence De M. Le Cardinal-Prince De Rohan, De La Dame De La Motte-Valois, Du Sieur De Cagliostro, & Autres; Tous Co-accusés*. Google Books. 1786. Accessed October 14, 2015, 25-26.

the scandal, depicts Leguay in a chemise gown and posed in such a way as to evoke the queen's portrait *en gaulle* (Figure 7). Having never personally met the queen, de la Motte could only have accomplished this disguise by being familiar with the Vigée-Lebrun's portrait *en gaulle* displayed at the Paris salon the previous year.⁹⁴

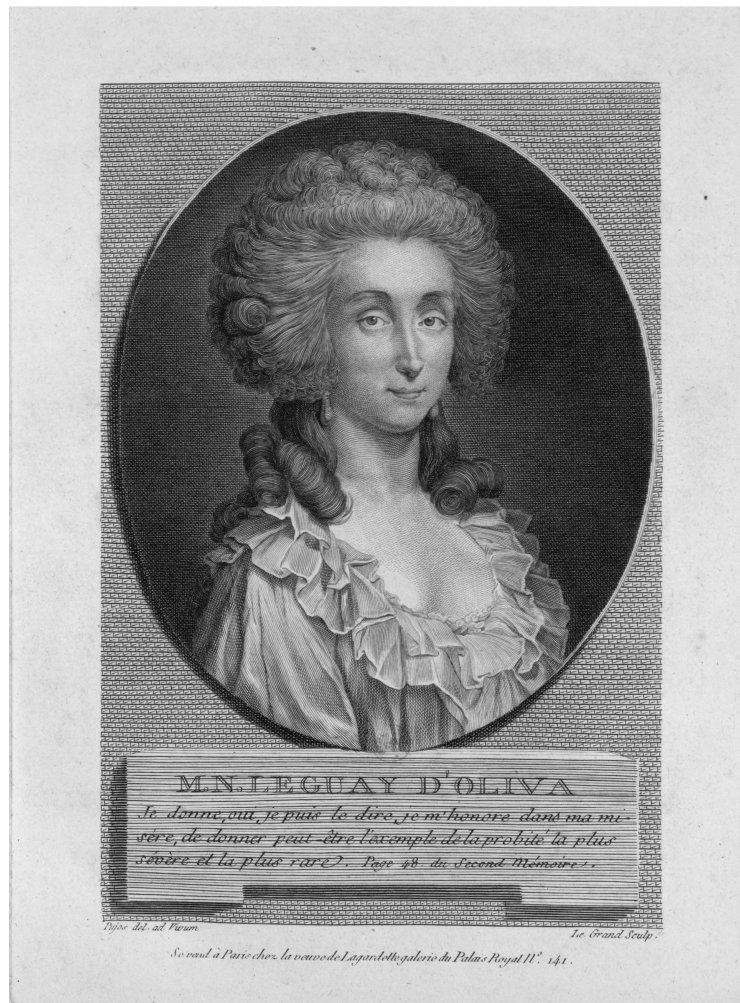


Figure 7. M.N. Leguay d'Oliva, *A Paris: chez la veuve de Lagardette*, c. 1786. Bibliothèque nationale de France. Reprinted with permission.

⁹⁴ Nesta H. Webster, *Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette Before the Revolution* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1937), 286.

The scam worked on the gullible cardinal, and the necklace was quickly purchased and given to de la Motte to deliver to the queen. The scandal broke in July 1785 when Boehmer and Bassenge sent a note to Marie-Antoinette mentioning “the most beautiful jewel in the world,” and their gratitude that she had allegedly had it procured via Rohan. A few scant weeks later, on August 15th, the duped Cardinal was arrested at Versailles as he was preparing to conduct mass, while Jeanne de la Motte and her conspirators had escaped to England, broken apart the necklace and sold the diamonds for profit. La Motte was later arrested, tried, and found guilty, and it was through the press that the details of the affair were brought to light. Though Marie-Antoinette was proven to have had nothing to do with the scandal, the fact that it was so easy for someone to believably masquerade as her, owing in part to her fondness for simple dress, cast the queen in worsening light.⁹⁵

In 1786, the attorney Jean Blondel took on the defense of the queen’s imposter, Leguay, and penned the hugely successful *memoires judiciaires* based on his client’s recounting of her involvement in the *affaire du collier*. Leguay’s description of how she was dressed that fateful day in August 1784 is worth noting, for not only does she identify the *gaule*, but also offers a description of the gown being of “speckled lawn” (*en robe blanche de linon moucheté*). Far from the typical assumption in costume history circles that the chemise gown was universally white and unadorned, we have evidence for

⁹⁵ For an excellent, in depth analysis of the Diamond Necklace Affair, see Sarah Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs the Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 167-211.

surface treatment not only in Leguay's recounting, but also in fashion plates, which show a wide range of fabrics, trims, and colors (see figures 10-12).

The *chemise à la reine* engendered additional scandal with its visual similarity to underwear and that garment's relationship to the sexual nature of women. The chemise gown took its name from a lady's undergarment, and the similarities between the two garments have tantalized fashion historians for decades—other terms such as *gaule* being interesting vernacular tangents that have, thus far, led to dead ends.⁹⁶ It is in the association with the chemise that the standard narrative of the *gaule* hits a bump in the road; many historians have described the chemise gown as being pulled on over the head, rather than stepped into with assistance by so-called tiring-women, as was the case with conventional-eighteenth-century dress. This change in dressing procedure, it is claimed, was deemed unseemly by critics of the day, since a lady could not properly dress herself.⁹⁷ As most art historians are not in the habit of studying extant garments directly, it is easy to see how this one fact was overlooked: that the only known extant chemise gown at Platt Hall in Manchester does indeed open all the way from neck to hem.

In other words, the *chemise à la reine* was a dress that could be put on alone, without an army of nobles and attendants. It could just as easily be taken off, with the tug of a cord—all of a sudden, one could go from dressed to undressed in the blink of an eye.

⁹⁶ Spelling alone is hard to pin down, and various post-eighteenth-century sources spell it *gaule*, *gaulle*, *gol*, *gole*, and every conceivable variation therein. Dress historian Aileen Ribeiro uses "*gaule*" interchangeably with "*chemise à la reine*." See Ribeiro, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century Europe*. Nesta H. Webster references a "*gaulle*, painted by Mme Vigée le Brun." See Webster, *Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette*, 258. For the purpose of this paper, I have chosen to primarily use "chemise gown" or "*chemise à la reine*."

⁹⁷ Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, *Fashion Victims: Dress at the Court of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 174-175. Chrisman-Campbell's scholarship is only the most recent in a succession of historians making this assertion, which appears to have originated with Ribeiro.

So close to undress was the chemise gown that, in England, Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire initially distanced herself from the style. Having been given a *chemise à la reine* from Marie-Antoinette, she initially took to the popular press to deny any intention of wearing it.⁹⁸ Meanwhile, Georgiana's fellow celebrity, Mary Robinson, embraced the muslin gown and made it into a sensation in London. Forced to grapple with being on the wrong side of the fashion trend, the Duchess soon began wearing the *chemise à la reine* to great acclaim.

Perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects about the story of the *chemise à la reine* is that, according to the standard costume history timeline set by Ribiero, Fraser, and Steele, it is rarely acknowledged to have existed prior to Marie-Antoinette's 1783 portrait *en gaulle*. In a very literal sense, this is true: The "Queen's chemise" could not exist before the queen wore it. However, the first mention of a garment identifiable as a chemise gown in written accounts appears much earlier, in 1775, and year of the first appearance of the chemise gown in portraiture is 1781 in Vigée-Lebrun's portrait of Madame du Barry.⁹⁹

Jeanne Bécu, Comtesse du Barry, was every bit as polarizing as Marie-Antoinette eventually became, and in many ways, set the stage and tone for Marie-Antoinette's life as Queen of France. Certainly, du Barry was about as common as they come. She was

⁹⁸ Byrne, *Perdita*, 191.

⁹⁹ Gabrielle Mar, and Charles Mar. *Ma Reine Infortunée—: Souvenirs De La Comtesse D'Adhémar, Dame Du Palais De Marie-Antoinette*. (Paris: Plon, 2006), 237. The Comtesse d'Adhémar mentions that while pregnant in 1775, the Comtesse d'Artois, who was the queen's sister-in-law, abandoned "the court dresses and Polonaises [a popular style of gown in the 1770s and 1780s] in favor of a pleated dress known as the chemise." This suggests that the chemise gown was, by the mid-1770s, present in the circle of Marie-Antoinette. Its leap from maternity wear to high-fashion can be traced from that point. Many thanks to Kendra Van Cleave for providing me with this quote.

illegitimate, lowborn, and she rose through the ranks of society from virtually the bottom level all the way up to the bed of the king. She was beautiful, and despite the way she has been portrayed in movies, literature, and academia, she was smart and had some political acumen. Perhaps the only thing that was really held against her, other than her low birth, was that she followed hard on the heels of Madame Pompadour, the most popular of Louis XV's mistresses.

The Petit Trianon, which ultimately went on to become the centerpiece in Marie-Antoinette's life, was at du Barry's disposal during her tenure at Versailles under Louis XV. It was du Barry who outfitted the little palace in fashionable décor and filled it with art, music, and parties, and really cemented its association with the role of the king's chief mistress. Du Barry was toppled from her top post when Louis XV died and his grandson and granddaughter-in-law ascended the throne, but her presence was never fully absent from Versailles. Exiled from Versailles to the Abbey du Pont-aux-Dames, she was well cared for in her retirement. After leaving the abbey, she continued to live her life as near to Versailles as she was allowed, and at some point in the late-1770s, she was introduced Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun.

If we are to follow the dates of portraits featuring women wearing the chemise gown in chronological order, the earliest portrait is Vigée-Lebrun's portrait of Madame du Barry, in 1781 (Figure 8), followed by her portraits of the Comtesse de Moreton and the Comtesse de Provence in 1782, and finally, in 1783, Marie-Antoinette's portrait.¹⁰⁰ There

¹⁰⁰ Both the comtesse de Provence's portrait *en gaulle* and Vigée-Lebrun's self portrait *en gaulle* were exhibited alongside Marie-Antoinette's in the 1783 salon. Their portraits, however, seem to have generated

is no question in contemporary written accounts that the queen was recognized as an early-adopter of the dress, but she held off having herself painted wearing it for far longer than the more *risqué* du Barry and the more adventurous Comtesses de Moreton and Provence.



Figure 8. Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, *Madame du Barry*, 1781. Oil on canvas, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

As to how the *chemise à la reine* factors into all of this, there is a school of thought that du Barry was aping the queen's fashion in order to flatter her and gain her favor, by having her portrait painted *en gaulle* by Vigée-Lebrun.¹⁰¹ Examining the timeline of the chemise gown, however, reveals that du Barry's portrait precedes Marie-Antoinette's by

little comment from the public. The intense scrutiny paid to the Marie-Antoinette's portrait further underscores the idea that it was one thing for lesser nobles and artists to be shown wearing a chemise gown in a public venue, and quite another for a queen.

¹⁰¹ Weber, *Queen of Fashion*, 159-160.

two years. Even though she was a style icon, Marie-Antoinette does not appear to be a fashion innovator. Criticized as she was for her fashion throughout her reign, she was typically following the trends—something her mother relentlessly nagged her over right up until she died—she was *too* trendy, according to Maria Theresa.¹⁰²

Allowing for this, the chemise gown may have made its initial fashionable debut (as opposed to maternity wear, as noted by the comtesse d'Adhémar in 1775) with du Barry and Vigée-Lebrun, who also chose to represent herself *en gaulle* in her 1781-82 self-portrait (Figure 9). This would make more sense with the historical record reflecting a less convoluted timeline involving a portrait of the chemise gown on du Barry first, and then Marie-Antoinette's portrait two years later. This also makes the subsequent uproar surrounding Marie-Antoinette's portrait more understandable. It wasn't just that the queen looked like she was wearing her underwear—it was just as much that the style had acquired an association, not only with the Creole women of dubious virtue, but the notorious du Barry. After all, had the queen not taken up residence in du Barry's former pleasure palace? Was Marie-Antoinette not behaving for the last several years more like a courtesan than a queen? Judging from the reaction to the 1783 portrait *en gaulle*, the public felt this was yet another sign that Marie-Antoinette was following in du Barry's footsteps.

¹⁰² Weber, *Queen of Fashion*, 85.



Figure 9. Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1781. Oil on canvas, 25 1/2 x 21 1/4 in. (64.8 x 54 cm) ACK 1949.02. Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas. In recognition of his service to the Kimbell Art Museum and his role in developing area collectors, the Board of Trustees of the Kimbell Art Foundation has dedicated this work from the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Kay Kimbell, founding benefactors of the Kimbell Art Museum, to the memory of Mr. Bertram Newhouse (1883–1982) of New York City. Reprinted with permission.

The public's association of the chemise gown with Marie-Antoinette begins to take shape in the early 1780s, though for members of the queen's inner circle, it was likely already understood to be her preferred uniform from at least the late 1770s.¹⁰³ Helped along with the decrying of Vigée-Lebrun's portrait of 1783, the chemise gown goes public and rapidly becomes known as the *chemise à la reine*. Studying fashion plates from the early 1780s reveals a wealth of chemise gowns in every color from pure white to

¹⁰³ Vigée-Lebrun mentions an encounter with the queen and her ladies in the gardens at Marly-le-Roi in the 1770s, and describes that "They were all in white dresses, and so young and pretty that for a moment I thought I was in a dream." See Vigée-Lebrun, *Souvenirs*, 24.

pastel pinks, lavenders, and greens. The structure of the garment, however, remains largely intact throughout the various iterations. It is loose, though shaped to the torso through drawstrings and a sash at the waist. It invariably includes a flounced collar at the neckline, always white, even in the case of a colored dress. The earliest versions of the chemise gown depict full sleeves, caught with ribbons in two or three places around the arms, and typically falling just past the elbow in a wide ruffle. Later in the 1780s, the sleeves become tight and terminate at the wrist in a small frill. The dress has begun to take a more structured fit in the bodice, which rises above the natural waistline, and more conforming in the skirts. By the 1790s, too, the dress appears to have lost its association with Marie-Antoinette and is being referred to as a *robe en gaulle*.

Terminology when applied to this style of garment is difficult. Tracing it only so far as Marie-Antoinette, the term *chemise à la reine* is in some ways inaccurate, if we are to consider what a woman would have called the dress in the day. Consulting fashion plates yields more confusion: There are countless references in the mid-1780s to various *chemise à la [name]*, with very little description of what distinguishes one from the other. The earliest image I have found, dated to 1781, describes a “*chemisette de mousseline* in the current fashion” (Figure 10).



Figure 10. “Chemisette de mousseline.” *Collection d’habillements modernes et galants avec les habillements des princes et seigneurs* [Paris]: [s.n.] , [c. 1781], Bunka Gakuen University Library, Digital Archive of Rare Materials (online archive). Reprinted with permission.

In another plate, also dated to 1781, we see an image of a chemise gown labeled “*chemise à la Guimard*,” presumably after the famous ballerina Marie-Madeleine Guimard who enjoyed the patronage of Marie-Antoinette (Figure 11).



Figure 11. “Chemise à la Guimard.” *Collection d’habillements modernes et galants avec les habillements des princes et seigneurs* [Paris]: [s.n.] , [ca. 1781], Bunka Gakuen University Library, Digital Archive of Rare Materials (online archive). Reprinted with permission.

Text: *La belle Adeline Coiffée en chapeau Figaro elle est vetue d’une chemise à la Guimard en linon a pois, tant son enfant par la main habillé d’une veste à la figaro avec culotte de matelot portant sur sa tête un chapeau a la cherebin.*

Another depicts the *chemise à la Jesus*, which is in white muslin and has a split skirt in the front, revealing a ruffled pink petticoat beneath (Figure 12).



Figure 12. “Chemise à la Jesus.” *Collection d’habillements modernes et galants avec les habillements des princes et seigneurs* [Paris]: [s.n.] , [ca. 1781], Bunka Gakuen University Library, Digital Archive of Rare Materials (online archive). Reprinted with permission.

Text: *La fiere Aglaé outrée jusqu’au sons de son âme de l’infidélité apparente de son amant, lui indique en l’accablant de reproches, l’heure et le lie d’un rendez-vous mystérieux: elle est habillee en chmise à la Jesus ayant un chapeau élégant à la Françiose et des palmes par dessus avec un ruban à l’inoculation.*)

Finally, dated 1784, we find the first reference to the *chemise à la reine*, post-dating the *Académie* scandal with the Vigée-Lebrun portrait the year before. And yet, the succeeding years provide plates that revert to the more descriptive names such as *robe en gaulle* and *chemise de mousseline*, favored before the debut of the 1783 portrait.

The evidence from the Caribbean that the sheer white dresses of Creole women depicted in Brunias' 1780 painting *Linen Market, Dominica* served as the inspiration for the chemise gown is compelling and cannot be discounted; that it was a marriage of two distinct cultures and tastes, one from the New World and the other from the Old, that brought about the chemise gown as a matter of course in the late-eighteenth-century, as proto-globalization closed the vast expanse of water between France and its plantations in the East Indies.

CHAPTER 3: GENDER AND SUBJECTIVITY

Seduced by fashion, both in furnishing her body and a myriad of royal establishments far removed from the fishbowl of Versailles, Marie-Antoinette sought out designers willing to create a tableau for her personal Utopia, one that reflected the tastes of an individual woman, and not the symbolic theatre inhabited by a Queen of France.¹⁰⁴ Rumored to have had countless lovers, both male and female, perhaps the only factual statement to that end is that Marie-Antoinette was a lover of fashion, both as it was performed and as it was lived in.¹⁰⁵ As the Reign of Terror plowed through the French aristocracy, followed close on its heels by the Napoleonic Empire, the new faces of power desired to eradicate all traces of the poster girl of the *ancien regime* and yet they, too, became enchanted with the elegant trappings that Marie-Antoinette left behind. Napoleon gave several of Marie-Antoinette's building projects to the Empress Josephine, who when she set about creating her own country escapes, raided the buildings of her predecessor for tasteful marble statues and fine Sèvres porcelains.¹⁰⁶ It is as though Marie-Antoinette, through sheer force of her good taste achieved a lasting imprint on French history as the creator of a tasteful epoch.¹⁰⁷

As a lover of fashion and good taste, Marie-Antoinette surrounded herself with men and women for whom *goût* was God. She was not the only acolyte to taste, but through her position as queen, she became its high priestess, its most visible participant. That

¹⁰⁴ Chantal Thomas, *The Wicked Queen: The Origins of the Myth of Marie-Antoinette* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 83.

¹⁰⁵ Fraser, *Marie-Antoinette*, 220.

¹⁰⁶ Martin, *Dairy Queens*, 260.

¹⁰⁷ Fraser, *Marie-Antoinette*, 220.

which the queen declared tasteful so did the rest of fashionable society. However, there are indications that Marie-Antoinette was not so much a taste originator, but the most visible adopter of the most current trends.¹⁰⁸ She relied heavily on her *marchandes des modes* and hairdressers to dictate the most up-to-the-minute fashions for her body, eventually creating an insular circle of fashion professionals, all but shutting out the highest ranking courtiers for whom preserving the etiquette of Versailles meant preserving their status at court.¹⁰⁹

Likewise, Marie-Antoinette attended closely to the advice of the most admired cabinetmakers and architects when furnishing her personal spaces. The interiors of her private residences were impeccably curated, each piece selected to harmonize with an overall idyllic whole. Whereas Versailles was an eclectic chaos of the intermingling fingerprints of Louis XIV and Louis XV everywhere one turned, Marie-Antoinette chose to remove herself from that fossilized world of noisome clashing styles and settled on private locations for escape, such as the Petit Trianon and the Hameau de la Reine, for her respite.¹¹⁰ There, she took indulgent diversions into play-acting the part of a simple country maid, an aspect of her personality couched into a wistful tapestry of privilege and reactions against customs that were not her own.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Chrisman-Campbell, *Fashion Victims*, 24.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 25.

¹¹⁰ Fraser, *Marie-Antoinette*, 73.

¹¹¹ A century earlier, the Duchesse de Montpensier, herself wishing to take refuge in the pastoral, wrote “Let there be a corner of the world in which it can be said that women are their own mistresses and do not have all the faults that are attributed to them; and let us celebrate ourselves for the centuries to come through a way of life that will immortalize us.” See Barbara R. Woshinsky, *Imagining Women’s Conventual Spaces in France, 1600-1800: The Cloister Disclosed* (Farnham, Surrey, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 130-131.

An interesting new angle appears when examining the portraits of Marie-Antoinette's female contemporaries in both France and England. Numerous portraits of women posing in chemise gowns were made in the last twenty years of the eighteenth century, and many can be discarded as simply following fashion trends of the day. However, in a number of other portraits, both sitter and costume require a far subtler, yet intentionally transgressive reading that may well have been understood by eighteenth-century audiences to be an indication of the sitter's ideals.

In order to explore the idea of the chemise gown as feministic uniform, one must ask the following question: who were these women? Much of my research has lead me to hypothesize that a significant number of the women who chose to be represented in portraits *en gaulle* during the 1780s and 1790s were, in fact, doing it for ideological reasons. Unconventional and controversial women of the late-eighteenth-century turn up repeatedly in portraits wearing this style of dress too often to ignore. Was it merely fashion or something greater?

Unfortunately, history does not record a clear statement as to whether or not these women adopted the chemise gown as a signifier of their social and political ideals, but it is possible to study what little was written directly regarding the chemise gown and come away with the distinct impression that this fashion was often associated with women who sought to break gender stereotypes.

THE QUEEN'S PLAYGROUND

Factoring into this milieu was the gift of the Petit Trianon by Louis XVI to Marie-Antoinette in 1774, upon their elevation to the throne. Built ten years before the new queen took possession of it, the Petit Trianon was originally intended to house Louis XV's royal mistress, Madame de Pompadour. Upon her death before its completion, the keys to the little pleasure palace passed to her successor, Madame du Barry, who installed herself within its confines as the chief mistress of the court of France. While du Barry was not exactly popular at court, the king's favor went to great lengths to legitimize her presence, and the gift of the Petit Trianon was seen as suitable for a king's mistress. The Petit Trianon had been built for the beloved lothario Louis XV and was where his chief mistress held court in lavish style. In contrast to his grandfather, Louis XVI never took a mistress, and subsequently the little palace transferred to Marie-Antoinette, now Queen of France. The Petit Trianon's identity as a place for pleasure-seeking was received by the court as combining the power of the royal mistress with the power of the throne in one woman. To the chauvinistic French court, this served to cement Marie-Antoinette's reputation for sensuous behavior, wholly unsuitable for a queen.

The strictures of privilege within Versailles were unassailable, at least according to the throngs of courtiers who clogged its halls day and night. While the palace was essentially open to the public, access to the inner corridors was managed by varying levels of royal favor, laid down in the seventeenth century by the chief architect of

Versailles, Louis XIV.¹¹² Access to the king or queen was, by principle, governed by these laws and guarded jealously by those who possessed the privilege. In particular, while the dressing of the monarch was seen as a public rite, only individuals bearing the highest rank in the court were accorded the honors of physically clothing the monarch.¹¹³ Marie-Antoinette famously had little patience for the tedious dressing ritual, one that frequently left her shivering naked before a room packed with courtiers while items of clothing were handed from one noblewoman to another, as ladies of ever increasing rank entered the room and had to be accorded the honor of putting the chemise on the queen.¹¹⁴ A true outsider in Versailles, Marie-Antoinette failed to gauge the importance that the nobility put on this display of rank, and she began dismantling the system gradually, until almost all of the court at Versailles was banished from the dressing chamber, save for the *modiste* Rose Bertin and hairdresser Léonard, who despite their skill in their respective trades were still commoners.¹¹⁵ Betrayed by the queen, the nobility nursed their wounds in not-so-restrained fashion, again fueling the rumors that swirled in the popular press about the queen who seemed intent presenting herself as much a commoner as possible, including sequestering herself with them during her toilette.

At the Petit Trianon, Marie-Antoinette was allowed (by her husband's decree) a level of privacy unheard of for a public figure, let alone a queen. She retreated there as often as

¹¹² Fraser, *Marie-Antoinette*, 74.

¹¹³ Campan, *Memoirs*, 89.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 90.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 90.

she could, holed up in its gilded rooms and sheltered from the claustrophobic throngs at Versailles. Remarkably, the king himself had to request permission to attend upon his wife at the Petit Trianon, and any edicts issued from the queen while installed there came bearing the proclamation “de par la Reine.”¹¹⁶ The social distance that Marie-Antoinette held between herself and her courtiers turned into a physical one with the Petit Trianon. Hidden behind mechanical privacy screens and locked doors that no one but herself held the key to, Marie-Antoinette cultivated her own little court, modeled provocatively upon that of the notorious du Barry. Her closest female friends, the Princesse de Lamballe, and the Duchesse de Polignac, as well as commoners such as Vigée-Lebrun, the dressmaker Rose Bertin, and the famous hairdresser Léonard, populated the Petit Trianon clique, pushing out royal courtiers who outranked them multiple times over and who were understandably upset at losing their birthright of privileged access to the queen in favor of upstart commoners and dilettantes.¹¹⁷ In Marie-Antoinette’s defense, she likely felt less pressured by new friends, who made no reference to her failure as a wife in bearing a son or as a queen in providing an heir to the throne.¹¹⁸ To her, the world at the Petit Trianon was one of her own making. As she is said to have told one visitor to the little palace, within its walls, “I am me.”¹¹⁹

The trope of the frivolous and out-of-touch queen is tempting to fall back on when discussing the origin of the chemise gown, but it is also distracting from the fact that

¹¹⁶ Campan, *Memoirs*, 138.

¹¹⁷ A similar battle between *Estates*, the rigid caste system of *ancien régime* France, took place in the *Académie* in 1783, the year that Vigée-Lebrun was accepted and debuted the portrait of Marie-Antoinette *en gaulle*. See Dunn, *Conditional Acceptance*, 19-22.

¹¹⁸ Thomas, *The Wicked Queen*, 90.

¹¹⁹ Weber, *Queen of Fashion*, 136.

women of Marie-Antoinette's stature had very few outlets for exerting their agency during this period. The idea of the individual, another Rousseauian concept, was fine for the common masses, but queens were not expected to be individuals.

Much has been written about Marie-Antoinette's acquisition of the Petit Trianon and the building of the Hameau, her pleasure dairy where she and her closest friends role-played milkmaids in almost complete and unheard of privacy for a member of the royal family (Figures 13 and 14).¹²⁰



Figure 13. North facing façade of the Petit Trianon. Wikimedia Commons.

¹²⁰ Martin, *Dairy Queens*, 160-164.



Figure 14. Hameau du Reine. Wikimedia Commons.

There is something furtive about the romantic Hameau in particular, when one is confronted with its stylized country beauty. It is a place rooted in an ideal past, linked to the fairy-tale trope of “once upon a time” where the heroine, a simple, but beautiful, country maid frolics happily among her perfumed sheep in a elegantly neglected English garden, where rain never falls and it is always a pleasant warm spring afternoon.¹²¹

Rousseau himself could have hardly created a more ideal location for his Sophie.¹²²

An admirer of Rousseau, though only in an abstracted meme-like way, Marie-Antoinette threw herself into the dream of the pastoral with such abandonment that, even while much of French society were rejecting the same stodgy principles as she, those

¹²¹ Fraser, *Marie-Antoinette*, 150.

¹²² Martin, *Dairy Queens*, 15; also, Fraser, *Marie-Antoinette*, 222.

same members of society viewed her rejection of the *ancien régime* as sacrilegious.¹²³ In the dichotomous atmosphere of late-eighteenth-century France, Marie-Antoinette was seen as ungrateful, spoiled, and undeserving of the great burden of privilege that God had favored her with. Her predecessor queen, Marie Leszczyńska, also a suspicious outsider to the court of France, eventually became so beloved because of her complete sublimation of any unqueenly personality trait that she was rendered practically deserving of sainthood by the time she died. Marie Leszczyńska would never be caught dead playacting the role of a milkmaid in a dairy, royal or otherwise. And yet, Marie-Antoinette was enacting a rite of French queens far more ancient than that of her austere and retiring predecessor. The pleasure dairy at Hameau followed an established tradition of royal dairies supervised directly by queens, which dated as far back as Catherine de'Medici, herself a foreigner but who managed to forge a French identity for herself.¹²⁴

The Hameau was, like Marie-Antoinette's country girl alter ego, little more than a façade. Though created as a royal dairy, its actual production of milk and milk products was miniscule and dedicated more to supplying the queen's picnics and parties at the Petit Trianon than to serving any wider charitable or profitable endeavor.¹²⁵ Much has been made of the Sèvres porcelain milk pails produced for the use of the royal milkmaids at the Hameau, and hardly an article is published on the topic without singling them out as an example of understated, yet jaw-dropping excess. However, the functionality of the Hameau is not compromised by the presence of Sèvres porcelain in proximity to the cows

¹²³ Zweig, et al., *Marie-Antoinette: Portrait*, 109.

¹²⁴ Martin, *Dairy Queens*, 15.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

(which were carefully bred and selected for their exquisite milk-making abilities), rather it underscored that this was the queen's domain.¹²⁶ While she may have pretended to be a common woman within its gardens, she was still the wife of God's anointed sovereign, blessed and elevated by his association.

With the image of a queen pretending to be a commoner in mind, it would have been even more jarring to the accepted narrative of French queens when one considers Marie-Antoinette's choice of setting for the Hameau. Built on the grounds of the Petit Trianon, which itself is built near to the pink palace, the Grand Trianon, on the vast grounds of Versailles, one can plot the maze of royal favor by following the well-trimmed paths from one building to the next. Acquired by the Sun King in 1661, Versailles swiftly grew from a relatively understated sixteenth-century hunting lodge into a behemoth of Baroque architecture. Shortly after Versailles became the royal residence, work began on the Grand Trianon, guided by the vision of Versailles architect Louis Le Vau. It was a gorgeous classical-style château, covered in pink marble and white and blue porcelain tiles—a fabulous retreat for Louis XIV's *maîtresse en titre*, Madame de Montespan, where she and her guests could retire from the strictures of court and relax. Some fifty years later, the Grand Trianon acquired its smaller satellite, the Petit Trianon.

There is relatively little scholarship on the manner in which the Petit Trianon was decorated during the residency of Madame du Barry, but under the guardianship of

¹²⁶ One of the aspects of life at the Petit Trianon that so disconcerted French society was the absolute rule that Marie-Antoinette had over her little dominion. Flying in the face of custom, she was indulged in ways no Queen of France had ever been before; decrees that were issued from Petit Trianon carried with them the phrase “de par le reine,” and even the king himself waited patiently for an invitation to visit his wife while in residence at the Petit Trianon, and never arrived unannounced or uninvited, nor stayed overnight with her. See Zweig et al., *Marie-Antoinette: Portrait*, 107.

Marie-Antoinette, the château was transformed into a neoclassical showpiece. Her preferred scheme of pale colors, primarily light blues accented with white, and a surprising lack of gilding, once again point towards the simplification of her inner circle.¹²⁷ Clothing, too, was an integral part of the interior and exterior of life at the Petit Trianon. The privacy that the grounds afforded the queen and the smallness of the château itself meant that Marie-Antoinette was very minimally attended, and therefore informality in dress was preferred, if not required. The size of the Petit Trianon necessitated a minimalism directly in contrast with every other aspect of Marie-Antoinette's life. This minimalism predicted the austerity of the Directoire period under Napoleon Bonaparte, and yet it retains restrained aspects of the flighty Rococo delight in cherubs and carved garlands. Stephen Zweig goes so far as to suggest abandoning the term "Louis Seize" for this period and renaming it "Marie-Antoinette style," for it is directly in relation to her taste and preferences at Petit Trianon that the style became defined.¹²⁸

When Louis XVI gifted the Petit Trianon to his young queen, it was with the approval of some of his most trusted advisers.¹²⁹ There is no indication that either Louis or Marie-

¹²⁷ Fraser, *Marie-Antoinette: The Journey*, 220.

¹²⁸ Zweig, *Marie-Antoinette: Portrait*, 106.

¹²⁹ The possibility that Louis XVI was well aware of the association of the Petit Trianon with royal mistresses is tantalizing. One source claims he gifted the little palace to Marie-Antoinette with the words, "These beautiful palaces have always been the retreats of the king's favourites." (Fraser, *Marie-Antoinette*, 151.) While in modern terms, the idea of the a husband favoring his wife above all others is wonderfully romantic, the court of Versailles was surprised at his obvious preferential treatment of Marie-Antoinette, and as the years wore on and no royal mistress was acknowledged, that surprise turned to distaste at the notion that a king could so irresponsibly imbue his wife with that much influence and power. Queens were typically foreign-born princesses who had agendas to influence the king in favor of their home courts. Mistresses, however, were typically of the homegrown variety, whose allegiance was always with France and had its interests in mind. When it became obvious that Louis XVI was disinterested in continuing the

Antoinette felt concerned about the association of the Petit Trianon with its previous mistresses, but it was only a matter of time that the public began to look suspiciously upon the activities taking place behind the mechanical mirrored privacy screens.¹³⁰ The idea of a royal personage having any privacy was a relatively foreign one at the French court, where anyone from fishwives to the highest ambassadors of the courts of Europe could expect to encounter the sovereign family at Versailles.¹³¹ Out of the prying eyes of the French court, Marie-Antoinette could indulge herself in her fantasy world of country dresses and wild gardens and forget that she was queen.

After the dissolution of the monarchy and the imprisonment of the Royal Family, the interiors of the Petit Trianon were stripped and auctioned off at bargain prices to fund the cash-strapped National Convention. It was only in relatively recent decades that some of what was lost in that culling has been returned to the Palace of Versailles. Likewise, a royal *laiterie*, created by Louis XVI for his wife (perhaps, as Meredith Martin suggests, to lure her away from her own *laiterie* at the Hameau) at Rambouillet was appropriated by Napoleon and turned into a showcase for the Emperor's own self-aggrandizing use of Sèvres porcelain.¹³² The trappings of Marie-Antoinette's life were served up to eager consumers and her effects scattered far and wide throughout space and time. A meticulous restoration of the Petit Trianon was carried out, and the château was fully

centuries-old custom of splitting the powerbase of the queen by naming a mistress, he unwittingly put his wife in the minefield of court political intrigue, and at center stage was her life away from view at the Petit Trianon.

¹³⁰ Fraser, *Marie-Antoinette*, 151.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹³² See Steven Adams, "Sèvres Porcelain and the Articulation of Imperial Identity in Napoleonic France," *Journal of Design History*. Vol. 20, No. 3 (Autumn 2007), 183-204.

opened to visitors in 2008; and while the personal effects of Marie-Antoinette are scattered throughout its charming rooms, the majority of the interior decorations are modern reconstructions.¹³³ Much of what exists with a firm provenance is kept in museum and private collections, far removed from its original intended environment. A chair here, a writing desk there, bearing the “PT” marking that indicates its former home, the simple artifacts of a complicated life.

Within the confines of the queen’s exclusive world away from Versailles, the dress code for simplicity was further codified: “I shall be quite alone,” Marie-Antoinette writes to Princess Louise of Hesse-Darmstadt, “So don’t dress up; country clothes and the men in frockcoats.”¹³⁴ It is within this context that the 1783 portrait *en gaulle* must be understood. Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun recounts how she encountered the queen and her ladies strolling the gardens at Marly in the 1770s, “All were in white dresses, and so young and pretty, it struck me like an apparition.”¹³⁵

The “country clothes” mentioned to in Marie-Antoinette’s letter to Princess Louise refers a less elaborate style of dress than what was required at Versailles. An entry in *Galerie des Modes*, dated 1778, describes a gown for walking in the country “as comfortable as it is pretty, and has the double advantage of making one appear fully dressed when one isn’t” (Figure 15).¹³⁶

¹³³ Jean-Jacques Aillagon, “After a One-Year Closure, the Petit Trianon Is Again Open to Visitors.” Swatch Group. September 1, 2008. Accessed October 14, 2015.

¹³⁴ Fraser, *Marie-Antoinette*, 177.

¹³⁵ Vigée-Lebrun, *Souvenirs*, 24.

¹³⁶ *Galerie des Modes et Costumes Français*, Plate 4. <http://digital.bunka.ac.jp/kichosho/file/No.169/169-0001-042.jpg>



Figure 15. “Femme de Qualité en Dèshabillé.” Pl.4. *Galerie des Modes et Costumes Français, 1778-1787*. Bunka Gakuen. Reprinted with permission.

The gown is made of linen, and the ubiquitous ruffle on the hem of the petticoat has been removed because it was “very inconvenient while walking.” The hair is described as “*négligée*,” less elaborate and shorter in height than what was common at court, and has been accented with a perky straw hat banded with blue silk and a sprig of pink flowers.¹³⁷ Overall, the intent was to abandon the royal uniform of Versailles, with all of its

¹³⁷ Translation courtesy of Cassidy Percoco.

restrictive corseting and immobilizing hoops, in favor of a simpler, natural, Rousseauian aesthetic.

Kimberley Chrisman-Campbell reaffirms the notion first put forth by Aileen Ribeiro that the chemise gown was a natural outgrowth of the female elite's preoccupation for play-acting shepherdesses and dairymaids, evidence of poorly grasped Rousseauian philosophy among the upper classes.¹³⁸ By contrast, Meredith Martin posits that:

In fact, Marie-Antoinette and other dairy patrons were not mocking rural life or Rousseauian reform. To the contrary, they were showcasing their admiration for these new ideas by using ... a form of pastoral expression that had served them well for centuries. Throughout the *ancien régime*, royal and elite women had embraced pastoral art and architecture precisely because it was so unbounded and fluid, enabling them to assert identity and power in veiled terms and to address the multiple, conflicting burdens of their gender and social station: as both guardians of nature and consumers of culture, objects of display who were paradoxically obliged to retreat from view.¹³⁹

The abolishment of formal clothing at the Petit Trianon, as well as its unprecedented privacy, apparently fed into the rumors of the queen's self-indulgent behavior that, by the early 1780s, were beginning to circulate widely in the popular press.¹⁴⁰ Fueled by resentment at the Royalist faction at court, the Duke d'Orleans funneled money into anonymous pamphlets ridiculing the king and queen.¹⁴¹ Other *libellists* took advantage of the decline in morality surrounding the queen's image, and the market became flooded with pamphlets and fictional memoirs detailing the sordid assignations behind the Petit

¹³⁸ Chrisman-Campbell, *Fashion Victims*, 177.

¹³⁹ Martin, *Dairy Queens*, 15.

¹⁴⁰ Campan, *Memoirs*, 224.

¹⁴¹ Warren Roberts, *Jacques-Louis David and Jean-Louis Prieur, Revolutionary Artists: The Public, the Populace, and Images of the French Revolution* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 31.

Trianon's gilded doors. So enmeshed is the chemise gown with the queen's identity that it crops up in *libelles* attacking Marie-Antoinette. One such libelle depicts the queen, *en gaulle*, directing a phallus-ostrich hybrid (yet another pun on the "Austrian Woman"), which is ridden by General Lafayette, who had attempted to mediate between the royalists and the revolutionaries in the mid-1780s (Figure 16).



Figure 16. Unknown artist, *Lafayette & Marie Antoinette*, c. 1790. Hand colored print, Unknown location.

Perhaps a laudable personality trait in Marie-Antoinette, she initially dismissed the rumormongering press as so absurd that it hardly warranted her attention. Chantal Thomas hypothesizes that "Marie-Antoinette's failure to recognize the dangers posed by

the pamphlets must be attributed to her profound confidence in the world into which she was born—an eventless world, in which time was merely the repetition of ceremony.”¹⁴² In short, she was beyond critique because she was, by divine right, Queen of France. However, this “divine right” extended only as far as her proximity to her husband—the further she strayed from his side, the more she opened herself to attack and the less he would be able to protect her.

RADICAL WOMEN AND THE PRINCIPLES OF DRESS

Throughout *A Vindication on the Rights of a Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft attacks Rousseau’s tendency to ignore that both sexes show an innate care for their dress. Instead, Rousseau places the interest in clothing squarely within the borders he has defined as “female” and ignores the equally masculine interest in personal adornment. Wollstonecraft argues that while Rousseau’s conception of the ideal man is centered on his worth in both intellectual and physical strength, “the thoughts of women ever hover round their persons, and is it surprising that their persons are reckoned most valuable?”¹⁴³

Yet, on one thing she and Rousseau are in agreement:

... That the physical part of the art of pleasing consists in ornaments, and for that very reason I should guard girls against the contagious fondness for dress so common to weak women, that they may not rest in the physical part.¹⁴⁴

This statement is one that would reappear continually throughout the nineteenth century as early feminist intellectuals addressed the issue of dress reform. Yet, there was

¹⁴² Thomas, *The Wicked Queen*, 51.

¹⁴³ Mary Wollstonecraft. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (University of California: J. Stockdale, 1793), 94.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 246.

no dress reform movement at the end of the eighteenth century when Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication on the Rights of a Woman*, though it could be argued that the tract was one of the earliest to give shape to the idea that dress was part and parcel of creating, not just an ideal woman, but an ideal feminist. Where Rousseau (and his ideological predecessor Samuel Richardson) used female dress as a signifier of virtue (or lack thereof), so too would later dress reformists liken overly fashionable, decorative, or excessively expensive clothing to a moral weakness in women.¹⁴⁵ The difference, however, is that dress reform was intended to elevate the woman from a mere slave to fashion, whereas Rousseauian philosophy intended to use dress as a means to gauge the inherent value of a woman. So, too, did the color white symbolize the freedom from corruption, both political and corporeal.¹⁴⁶ The one thing the Rousseauists and the early feminists had in common was the ideal of the white dress.

The chemise dress seems to have filled the need for a fashionable, yet rational style of gown. Its adoption by high society ladies in Paris and London, as well as its association with the Queen of France lent it an air of *haute couture*, while its simple construction and virginal whiteness seemed to have sprung from the pages of *Émile*. Taking stock of the overwhelming array of English and French portraits *en gaulle* produced from 1785-1795, the popularity of the style was clearly not hampered by its association with Marie-

¹⁴⁵ Katrina Navickas. ““That Sash Will Hang You’: Political Clothing and Adornment in England, 1780-1840.” *Journal of British Studies* 49 (3). (Cambridge University Press, North American Conference on British Studies, 2010), 557.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 556.

Antoinette. Sir John Hoppner painted Mary Wollstonecraft herself in 1787 wearing a chemise gown (Figure 17).



Figure 17. Sir John Hoppner, Mary Wollstonecraft, 1787. Oil on canvas, location unknown.

Written in the same year that Hoppner captured her likeness on canvas, Wollstonecraft wrote in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, “The beauty of dress (I shall raise astonishment by saying so) is not being conspicuous one way or the other; when it neither distorts, or hides the human form by unnatural protuberances.”¹⁴⁷ These “unnatural protuberances” could be taken to refer to panniers that, aside from highly formal court dress reserved only for a small subset of the elite, had begun to disappear from female dress in the early part of the 1780s when the chemise gown makes its first

¹⁴⁷ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: With Reflections on Female Conduct, in the More Important Duties of Life* (Oxford University: J. Johnson, 1787), 36.

appearance. The unfashionable panniers were discarded in favor of softer, rounder pads tied at the waist that accentuated the curve of the female hips rather than deformed it.

Jacques-Louis David painted another challenger to conventional womanhood, Marie-Anne Pierrette Paulze, the scientist and wife of Antoine Lavoisier, in a chemise gown. In the double portrait of husband and wife, painted in 1788, it is Paulze who dominates the enormous canvas, with her left arm propped on her husband's shoulder, her right crossing his physical space to rest on the table, as though supervising Lavoisier's research. Lavoisier completes this hardly subtle performance of female authority by looking up at his wife from his seat with a slightly awe-struck expression. Paulze's gauzy white chemise gown takes possession of the eye to the point where every other object in the sparsely furnished room, including her black-clad husband, is rendered insignificant in comparison. Her expression has intelligent warmth to it as she looks out and slightly down at the viewer, who must stand beneath her and look up to match her gaze (Figure 18).



Figure 18. Jacques-Louis David, *Portrait of Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier and his wife*, 1787. Oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Another female artist beside Vigée-Lebrun chose to portray herself wearing the chemise gown in two separate self-portraits. Anglo-Swiss artist Angelica Kauffmann painted her 1787 self-portrait wearing a chemise gown. Four years later, Kauffmann places herself at the center of the allegorical battle for her attention between Music and Painting, in which the artist appears to be wrestling with her conscience over what art

form will prevail. Music, clad in a lustrous red gown, grips the Artist by the hand, while Painting, represented in the cool blue color of logic points into the distance as though instructing her to go forward towards greatness. Between them stands the Artist, clad in a virtuous white chemise gown in the process of taking a step in the direction Painting points (Figure 19).



Figure 19. Angelica Kauffmann, *Self-Portrait Hesitating Between Music and Painting*, 1794. Oil on canvas, Nostell Priory, The St Oswald Collection (National Trust). Reprinted with permission.

Rejecting the advances of passion in the form of Music, the chemise gown-wearing Kauffmann reverses the narrative of the chemise gown as something associated with lust and sexual excess and aligns it visually with the rational aspect of Art.

Women painted *en gaulle* who could be ranked with Madame du Barry include Lady Elizabeth Foster, the live-in mistress of the William Cavendish, fifth Duke of Devonshire and close companion of Georgiana Cavendish, his Duchess. The Devonshires, along with

Bess Foster, formed an unusual triad in London society, accepted despite their unconventional lifestyle on account of the Duke and Duchess' extremely influential relationships with the Crown and Parliament. After Georgiana's death in 1806, Bess married the Duke and became the next Duchess of Devonshire. An engraving of Bess and Georgiana by John Downman, executed in the mid-1780s, depicts both women in chemise gowns (Figure 20).



Figure 20. John Downman, *The Two Duchesses of Devonshire*, 1785-1790. Print, Ickworth House, Suffolk. Reprinted with permission.

By the time that the Duchess of Devonshire had begun to popularize the chemise gown, in the late-1780s, the style was swiftly becoming a fixture in female fashion, despite its early inference of the moral laxity of the queen after which it was named. The fact that it had such a strong association with Rousseauian ideals, as well as being a staple item in the closets of respected intellectual and influential women of the post-Revolution period, all but erased the negative connotations that beset Marie-Antoinette when she chose to have herself depicted *en gaulle*. Indeed, the next phase of fashion during the Napoleonic period owed its roots to the queen's little white dress; the chemise gown ultimately would evolve into the gauzy white Directoire dresses favored in the early nineteenth century. These dresses, which supposedly took their cue from Classical Greece, were in reality were the direct descendants of the *chemise á la reine*.

CONCLUSION

The final word on the *chemise à la reine* has yet to be written. A garment made up of complicated narratives, from the Caribbean to the Petit Trianon, the fashionable cognoscenti of Paris and London to the average *citoyenne*, it often felt like a shouting match amongst each layer of society that it touched. Attempting to parse the symbolic meaning of an otherwise unassuming frock, I decided the best way to look at the chemise gown was from the perspective of the woman who popularized it.

Marie-Antoinette holds the unique position of nonpareil excess during a period of violently fluctuating socio-political upheaval. Throughout the intervening 258 years between her birth and the writing of this thesis, her image in the modern world has come to represent, and define, an era of unimaginable decadence. To be sure, her life was filled with the gilded trappings of an ancient royal magnificence that is hard to wrap the modern mind around.

However, in researching the *chemise à la reine*, I came to see a different version of Marie-Antoinette emerging. Authors such as art historians Mary Sheriff and Deena Goodman have argued convincingly for her circle of friends as the beginning of a feminist society, a group of women in a position of power, able to cast off the trappings of traditional femininity in favor of agency, a society whose medium of expression wasn't the written word, but visual design. To be sure, there had been powerful women who dominated Versailles before Marie-Antoinette, such as Madame de Pompadour, but what Marie-Antoinette accomplished was independence separate from her affiliation with a man. After all, it is Marie-Antoinette's face that adorns countless items of clothing,

décor, and pop art, and who is still featured in film and television—to the point where her husband, Louis XVI, is relegated to a footnote in the grand spectacle of her life.

Other historians, such as Antonia Fraser, sought to create a complete narrative of Marie-Antoinette's life without coming down hard on one side or the other of feminist theory, but all the same arrived at the conclusion that Marie-Antoinette was an individual first, and a queen second. Historian Caroline Weber, too, illustrates an individual who, because of her social standing, was allowed latitude to express herself through her self-image, and winning the alienation, instead of the hearts of her adoptive land as a result, became the focus of a hostile society that viewed the frivolous excesses of the *ancien regime* as insupportable.

This hints at the profound conflict between individual and icon that show up regularly throughout Marie-Antoinette's life, from the moment she is informed of her impending nuptials to the Dauphin of France to her final words on the scaffold. One only has to read a very small amount of correspondence between Marie-Antoinette and her mother, the Empress Maria Theresa, to be introduced to the cringe-worthy rebukes delivered by a disapproving mother to an errant teenager. It is hard not to admire the rebellious Dauphine who sends her mother a portrait of herself astride a war horse, dressed as a man, expressly against her mother's wishes. The youngest of the daughters of Maria Theresa, Marie-Antoinette had perhaps given no indication while in Vienna and under her mother's watchful gaze that, once released into the wild, she would immediately revel in the freedom and begin to construct an identity separate from that of either Austria or France. However, this was freedom that was not bound to last, for the relatively laidback

court at Vienna was the polar opposite of the rigid world of ceremony at Versailles.

Throughout her tenure at Versailles, the historical record describes Marie-Antoinette's ambition both to win the hearts of the French and to follow her own heart wherever it led. Madame Campan alluded to the queen's tendency to be gullible and too trusting, as though her innate good nature was assumed to be reciprocated in everyone that surrounded her. Upon the disillusionment of her first seven years in France, which most prominently focused on her lack of an heir, Marie-Antoinette appeared to retreat into an inner, safer world of her own creation. She was given the Petit Trianon and then spent lavishly to build a working dairy on its grounds where she could role-play the part of a shepherdess. She rejected the strict dress code at Versailles and adopted a plain muslin gown, and then flaunted it to the world in a shocking display of agency. She turned away the highest-ranking courtiers, who had proven to be focused on their own ambition, and allowed loyal commoners and lesser nobles to occupy the privileged company of the queen. The Trianon circle demanded nothing of her; they did not tax her convictions, challenge her resolve, nor judge her for her foreign origin. Marie-Antoinette created a world for herself that was the antithesis of Versailles, and she reveled in it unapologetically.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can reconstruct the past to suit the prejudices of our time. Prior to feminist theory, Marie-Antoinette was singled out as a harrowing figure of the unchecked proclivities of a woman in power. She was insensitive, ignorant, sensual, and mysterious. She was a vixen, a witch, and a harridan. She was a libertine, a Sapphic whore, and a ditz. Post-feminism, Marie-Antoinette emerges as the unsung

heroine of an early feminist world. Indeed, when I first began research for this thesis, I was tempted to cast her in the role of the Brave New Woman, who united her followers with a uniform made of flowing white muslin and freedom.

In researching, however, I began to see Marie-Antoinette on far more human terms. Her august position as Queen of France was a persona she was made to adopt and a role that was difficult for her to portray convincingly. She was destined to queenship for certain, having been born into it. But, in so many ways that became evident over the course of writing this thesis, she was not suited for it. Had she been allowed to stay at Schönbrunn with her mother, as her elder sister had managed, she may well have flourished as an example of Enlightenment womanhood. Destiny, however, gives her another path, one far more dazzling than those afforded her sisters. Though the youngest of the daughters of Maria Theresa, the Archduchess Antoine was delivered to France, the premier court in the world.

On the surface, her identity was forever altered—she was immediately renamed Marie-Antoinette in the French fashion, and upon stepping on French soil, she was stripped of her clothes, her friends, even her pet dog. Nothing that was not French was allowed to follow her to Versailles (an exception was made for the dog, which was sent to her some months after she was married). She was expected to forget everything Austrian, but as becomes quickly apparent, Marie-Antoinette could not forget that she was herself. She never quite shed her accent, nor her Germanic ways. She spent the next twenty-three years in a highly visible fight not to sublimate her identity, resorting at first to cheeky commissioned portraits, and then to fashion and architecture. Perhaps it is a

blessing that she was not more intellectually inclined, lest she had provoked the establishment further by penning treatises on the naturalness of womankind that she so willingly embraced. Such outspoken behavior on the part of a queen would have likely made things far more difficult for her. Instead, Marie-Antoinette focused on what she was naturally inclined towards: music, art, architecture, and of course, clothing.

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Disposition Draperies Expression Harmony History Invention Landskip Lights Proportion Passion Portraiture Sculpture Style Truth Unity, &c. In which is contained, An account of the Athenian, Roman, Venetian and Flemish schools. To which is added, The balance of painters. Being The Names of the most noted Painters, and their Degrees of Perfection in the Four principal Parts of their Art: Of singular Use to those who would form an Idea of the Value of Paintings and Pictures. Written originally in French by Mons. du Piles, Author of The Lives of the Painters. And now first translated into English. By a painter. London: Printed for J. Osborn, at the Golden Ball, in Pater-Noster Row. Google Books, accessed March 26, 2016.

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APPENDIX I: VISUAL ANALYSIS OF AN EXTANT CHEMISE À LA REINE

The Platt Hall chemise gown, unique in that it is the only known extant example of the early iteration of this style, was removed from permanent display in 2014, affording the chance to examine the gown off the mannequin for the first time since it was installed in the 1980s.¹⁴⁸

To describe it simply, the Platt Hall chemise gown is a tube consisting of four rectangular panels, with a finished hem circumference of 338 cm, or roughly equaling three-times the width of the wearer's bust measurement.¹⁴⁹ Accommodation for the armholes (the bottom, curved portion of an armhole) of the sleeves are made by a gentle scooping out of the fabric from the two back pieces, and a strip of plain cotton acts as a shoulder strap to which the top of the sleeve is pleated. The neckline is permanently gathered in place in the back and a narrow binding of plain cotton has been stitched over it. In the front, the neckline has a drawstring channel that extends from the center front opening to the point where the shoulder pieces are attached; the drawstring is tacked down at the end point. The entire gown is open from neckline to hem, its closures consisting of a drawstring at the center-front neckline, a drawstring spaced 13 cm down

¹⁴⁸ There are at least two other known chemise-like gowns that date from 1786-1790 in museum collections. They do not display the characteristic simple drawstring construction of the pre-1785 chemise gowns, as typified by the Platt Hall chemise, and therefore are outside the scope of this thesis. The first is an example worn by Madame Oberkampf and housed in the Musée de la Toile de Jouy in France. It is made from white embroidered *mousseline* and has a drawstring front, but a fitted back. The second example is housed in a collection in North Carolina and was purportedly worn as a wedding dress by Dolly Miltimore in 1786. The North Carolina example is made from peach silk taffeta, and it too features a fitted back with a drawstring front. Owing to the differences in construction, vis-à-vis the fitted back, I have chosen to exclude them from the analysis of the earlier complete drawstring method of controlling the fit as seen in pre-1786 chemise gowns represented in artwork and demonstrated in the Platt Hall chemise.

¹⁴⁹ This calculation was made based on the size of a 1.5 m tall woman, wearing a pair of stays.

from the neckline, and another drawstring spaced 13 cm from that, ending approximately at waist-level. It is made of fine Indian cotton with a delicate woven zig-zag pattern, quite possibly an example of jamdani work.¹⁵⁰ Each zig-zag is spaced 1 cm apart and runs the width of the weft, which is about 66 cm wide. The selvages are astonishingly tiny, approximately 0.635 cm wide, along which the panels are joined with a running stitch. The front opening edges of the gown are embellished with a narrow cotton fringe, 1 cm wide, from the waist to the hem, and would have hung open from the waist down, revealing the petticoat beneath. The gown is about 10 cm longer in the back than the front, creating a slight train that would trail behind the wearer as she walked. The hem itself is a perplexing mix of having been bound from the backside of the fabric along part of the edge and having been folded up twice and straight-stitched in place in other areas. This could be an indication of an alteration or repair made after the gown was constructed. A neck flounce that had been displayed with the gown since its initial installation in the 1960s was added by the then-curator, and has been removed from the gown upon its deinstallation, so it was not taken into consideration for the purpose of this analysis.

Stitches used in the construction Plat Hall chemise gown consist of backstitch (used for stress-bearing seams, such as stitching the sleeves to the armholes) and running stitch (used for seams that would not be stressed, such as joining the body panels, stitching the

¹⁵⁰ Jamdani is finely woven cotton muslin known for its transparency, produced by specialist weavers in Bangladesh. The description on the Manchester Galleries online collection refers to the weave as “jaindane.” The only verifiable source for “jaindane” is in the *Cyclopædia of India and of Eastern and Southern Asia*, published in 1873, leading the author to theorize that the term may be a mishearing of “jamdani.”

casings for the drawstrings to the body of the gown, stitching the fringe to the edges of the center-front opening, finishing the seams on the shoulders, and the hem of the gown and the sleeves). In all cases where it was easily apparent without interfering with the condition of the gown, a single thread was employed in the stitching.¹⁵¹

It is exceptionally simple in construction and would have taken a seamstress of average skill a few days of work to produce.¹⁵² This is in contrast to more elaborate styles of clothing worn by elite women, such as the *robe à l'anglaise*, which uses considerably more fabric. While there is no meaningful difference in the sewing techniques necessary to make a *robe à l'anglaise* and a chemise gown, the difference in construction, fabric, fabric quantity, and most importantly, fitting is very apparent when the two styles are compared. A simple drawstring provides all the shaping there is for the chemise gown, contrasted with the highly fitted *anglaise*, which required tailoring closely to the wearer's body. Distinct, too, are the differences in underpinnings between these respective styles. An *anglaise* would necessitate the following items worn beneath it: shift, a pair of stays fully boned with whalebone, petticoat, panniers or padded rolls to hold the skirts out in the characteristic eighteenth-century silhouette, another petticoat over the panniers, and finally the gown itself. The chemise, by contrast, would require the following: shift, lightly boned stays, and perhaps one or two petticoats, the topmost which would be exposed through the parting of the skirts as the wearer moved. Less cumbersome and

¹⁵¹ It was not possible to determine without damaging the gown whether the thread was cotton, linen, or silk. However, given the good condition of the thread, it is likely to be either linen or cotton, as silk is prone to degrading over time.

¹⁵² This conclusion was reached by presuming that the author is at least an average sewist by eighteenth century standards, and it took her approximately twenty hours to complete a reproduction of the Platt Hall chemise gown.

restrictive by far, the chemise gown is practically one step removed from complete undress according to eighteenth-century standards.

Pattern based on the Platt Hall chemise gown, drafted by the author.

